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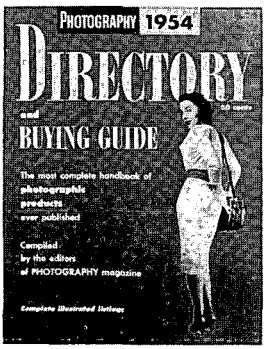

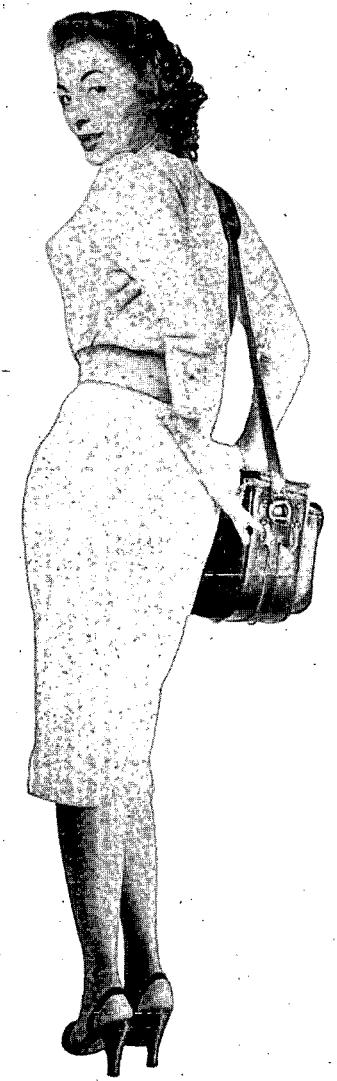

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William B. Ziff (1898-1953) Founder
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New York 17, New York

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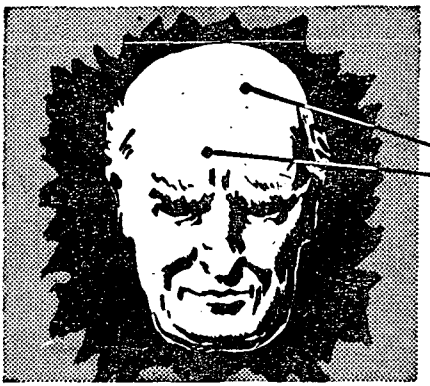

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BOIL ONE CAT

BY LYSANDER KEMP

Miss Pritchard was more than a resident of Boston; she was Boston. She was steeped in heritage, she poured a mean cup of tea, she was suspicious of anyone whose ancestors hadn't sat at the captain's table on the Mayflower.

Give a woman like that the ability to knock off a miracle or two, and somebody's going to get into trouble. Like the mayor, for instance....

ANYBODY else would have worried. Should the cat be boiled whole, for instance, or skinned and cleaned first like a rabbit? And when it was boiled, what then? Eat it? All of it? Or sip the broth?

It was not a simple matter, then, and anybody else would have worried—anybody else but Miss Pritchard, that is. Her old Boston blood was as blue as the bluest, her ancestral home on Beacon Hill was as fine as the finest, and she never worried about anything whatsoever. In this instance she merely instructed the chauffeur to obtain one cat, instructed the gardener to chloroform it, and instructed the cook to boil it for twenty-four hours.

The cook was not astonish-

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ed in the least. "Shall I boil it whole, ma'am," she asked, "or fricassee it?"

"However you please, Rachel," Miss Pritchard replied, and that was that. Rachel boiled it whole, arising twice or three times during the night to replace the water that had simmered away.

The matter of the cat had come up that afternoon at tea, when the brightest of the Talbott girls, who was not attractive and therefore read a good deal, mentioned that she had seen a recipe for invisibility in a book about the Seychelles Islands. It went simply, "Boil one cat for twenty-four hours."

"Where," Miss Pritchard demanded, "are the Seychelles Islands?" But the Talbott girl, although she had read the book, said that she had no idea. She was not, after all, so *terribly* unattractive. "However," Miss Pritchard said, "it really makes no difference. I shall try it anyhow. I have always wanted to be invisible." This statement was accepted as a very small joke, and promptly forgotten.

It was at exactly five-thirty that afternoon when the dead cat was popped into the pot of boiling water. Twenty-four hours later, Rachel appeared in the drawing-room to report. When she saw that Miss Pritchard was not there, she called to the maid and asked her to inform the mistress that the cat was done. The maid went off, but came to the kitchen shortly afterward to say that she could not find the mistress anywhere. They enlisted the butler's aid and searched the house, and later called the police, but Miss Pritchard could not be found.

The reason was, of course, that she had turned invisible on the dot of five-thirty. Moreover, she had turned invisible without having gone near the nasty mess of a boiled cat out in the kitchen, which demonstrates her wisdom in not worrying about eating it and all.

She was a little surprised at her new condition. She had not really expected the magic to work, for of course it was not a New England recipe and you never could tell about foreigners. It had worked splendidly, however, and completely. She was reading a book when it happened, and suddenly there was no book. She stood up and looked down at herself, and saw absolutely nothing, and a look into the great pier-glass in the hall confirmed it. Not only was she herself invisible, but her

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clothing also; and to judge from the book, anything she carried would likewise vanish from sight. She picked up a small pewter bowl from the hall table and it vanished. She replaced it and it reappeared. The recipe had been extraordinarily good. Miss Pritchard for a moment felt very kindly toward the Seychelles Islands, crammed with foreigners though they might be.

At that moment she heard Rachel calling to the maid about the cat, and realized that her disappearance must be explained in some manner. There was nothing she could do about that for the moment, though, because first she must avoid being touched or bumped when they began searching. So she tiptoed off to a corner of the drawing-room and sat down on the rug, quite confident that nobody would come near her. She had not sat on the rug since she was a little girl, and it was almost impossible to feel respectable and Bostonian, but she consoled herself with the fact that she could not be seen.

The search took a full two hours, for they looked everythere, from the cellar to the attic. Once the butler came within two or three feet of her, to peer behind a couch, and she trembled. She was not trembling for fear of discovery, however. She was trembling with indignation to think that he should look for her—for *her*—behind a *couch*, of all places. And when, a little later, the maid called down the stairs, "She ain't in the linen-closet," it was all Miss Pritchard could do to hold her tongue. Finally they gave up, the butler called the police, and all the servants went back to the kitchen for their suppers. Miss Pritchard was able to creep upstairs and into her room without being heard. She closed and locked the door, sighed with relief, and then began to make plans.

The one really pressing problem was to empty the house of servants. After pondering a while, she sat down and wrote a note to the butler, saying that she had suddenly been called away, and that all the help should take a two-week vacation with pay. She also wrote out generous cheques for each, and placed them in the envelope with the note. Later she would creep downstairs while the servants slept and leave it on the hall table, addressed to the butler. It would surely be found in the morning, and she hoped none of them would remember for certain that it

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was not there the night before.

Also, she had to explain her absence to those on Beacon Hill who would be upset if they heard she had vanished. This was easily solved: she wrote a note to the Merriam woman, which she would mail when she dared to venture outside. The note said that she had been called away suddenly to Grand Rapids. Nobody from Boston, to her knowledge, had ever gone there before, and the Merriam woman's busy tongue would spread the news throughout Beacon Hill in no time at all.

When this was done, she passed an hour or two mapping her strategy for the days to come, until she was sure the staff was asleep. Then she carefully took the note down to the hall, placed it conspicuously on the table near the pewter bowl, returned to her room without having aroused anybody, and went confidently to bed and to sleep.

Everything worked perfectly. In the morning she heard the butler calling to the maid about the note he had found, and then heard them calling to the cook, the chauffeur and the gardener. They all talked excitedly, but she could not tell if they were aware of anything more unusual than the fact she departed without a word. Apparently they were not, for later she heard them saying goodbye, heard the door close several times, and one by one saw them go off down the street with their grips. At last they were all gone, the house was empty.

Miss Pritchard turned from the window and said, "Whoopee!" aloud, then immediately reprimanded herself. She might be invisible, but she was still a Pritchard. Then, because it was late in the morning, she hurried down to the kitchen to fix herself a breakfast.

It was not a particularly successful meal. In the first place, she had never prepared her own before in all her life; and in the second place, things disappeared when she picked them up. Fortunately the magic operated only on portable objects— she could touch the sink or the table without causing them to vanish. But when she began to cut a grapefruit, both the fruit and the knife disappeared. It was disconcerting, and mildly dangerous, to cut an invisible grapefruit with a sharp but invisible knife. She succeeded, only to find it equally difficult to eat an invisible grapefruit with an invisible spoon. She

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had less trouble with the cereal, but spilled hot coffee on herself while pouring it unseen from a vanished pot.

However, these vexations could not daunt her good spirits. It was aggravating at the moment to have everything she picked up immediately disappear, but she could also perceive certain advantages—if, for instance, she wished to transport a baseball bat with which to club the extremely Irish mayor, a project she was considering with great relish. When breakfast was finished she mailed the note to the Merriam woman, leaving and entering by the back door because the front door was too visible and would certainly cause an inquiry if it were seen to open and close by itself. Then she was free to plan out the projects for which she had wished to become invisible.

She settled on two projects for the time being. The second was to lay out in lavender the very Irish mayor, but the first sprang from a hatred even dearer to her heart: Miss Pritchard was an ardent anti-vivisectionist. The anti-vivisectionists are strong in Boston—you can barely subdue any one of them even with a swamp elm club—and for years Miss Pritchard had been one of the strongest, devoting both time and money to the cause. Her favorite target for years was the experimental laboratory at Harvard, and now that she was invisible she planned a full-scale invasion. Then she ate lunch, disdainfully washed the dishes from breakfast and lunch, and set out.

Her destination was not Harvard, however; that would have to wait a day. First she needed several items of equipment, and she was on her way to a department store. There was no danger near her home, but as she approached the heart of the city she was in trouble. The pedestrian traffic was not heavy, but there was the constant danger of being knocked down by people striding along without, of course, seeing her in front of them. She finally managed to reach the store by a series of skillful maneuvers, sometimes walking (as aristocratically as possible) in the gutters, sometimes ducking behind lamp-posts at the last moment. Twice she was brushed against, but each time the pedestrian was too pre-occupied to notice that he had brushed against seemingly thin air. Inside the store she threaded her way to the

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shoe section and sat down in an empty row of seats to catch her breath. Then she headed for the sporting department.

Miss Pritchard intended to acquire a baseball bat for possible future use—she still had not decided exactly how to deal with the mayor—but first of all she was intent upon self-protection. The department was almost empty of customers and her acquisitions were easily made. She simply waited until nobody was looking, and then picked up what she wanted. When she picked up a football helmet from the counter it disappeared at once, and she tried it on. It was too big, and she put it back into visibility. Then she noticed another which had a nose-guard, and when she tried it on it fit perfectly. Now if she were bumped to the sidewalk, at least she would not crack her skull.

Next she wanted a baseball umpire's chest - protector. After some discreet scouting she found one, and it too disappeared when she picked it up. Her use for it was extremely unorthodox. Instead of wearing it in front, she managed—after much fiddling with the straps—to hang it behind. Now if she were bumped to the sidewalk, at least she would not break her hip.

Miss Pritchard almost giggled aloud when she suddenly thought of how the Merriam woman's froggish eyes would pop out to see her now, with a football helmet on her dainty head and a chest-protector slung rakishly across what she always thought of (when it was necessary to think of it at all) as the part on which one sits down. Then she appropriated a baseball bat, Mr. Theodore Williams model. He might be Ted to the vulgar, but she and Mr. Williams had never met and therefore he was not Ted to her. Finally she departed in her new armor. The return trip was uneventful.

On the following morning, in the laboratory at Harvard, a certain Joseph Webster walked up to a caged female dog and let it out. He was about to try a skin experiment, and began to shave off a patch of hair on the dog's back. The dog wriggled, and Webster said, "Come on, pooch, hold still, it doesn't hurt."

"No," the dog replied in Beacon Hill accents, "but it tickles."

Webster dropped the razor

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and gaped. "*What* did you say?"

"I said, it tickles. Most unpleasantly, in fact."

The dog's mouth did not seem to be forming the words but it was obviously talking. Webster shoved it back into its cage and ran for help. When he returned with his superior, he said, "I want you to hear this dog, so you can tell me I'm not crazy." Then he said to the dog, "What did you say to me a few minutes ago?"

"I said—this is the third time—it tickles. I detest being tickled by an oaf."

"My god!" the superior said. Then he asked the dog, "Please say something else."

"Gladly. What would you like to hear? Shall I recite 'Old Dog Tray'?"

The superior was trembling violently. "No . . . no, thank you." He turned his bloodless face to Webster and said, "We're *both* crazy." Webster nodded in silence. "But let's not tell anybody about this. Let's go get a drink." Webster nodded again, and the two men abruptly stumbled out of the room.

Five minutes later, in another room, two students were running a rat through a maze. As they watched and took notes, the rat discovered it had entered a dead end, and as it turned about it said, "Oh, fiddlesticks!"

The two students looked at each other questioningly. "Did you say something?" the first asked.

"No. I thought you did," the second replied.

"Neither of you did," the rat said in cultivated female tones. "*I* did." The rat was male, and would be distressed if it knew it had suddenly become a female impersonator, but Miss Pritchard had no time for fine points.

The two students stared, first at the rat, then at each other. "I'm going to get stinking drunk," the first said. "Me too," the second said. They departed hastily.

During the remainder of the morning, these scenes were repeated throughout the laboratory. A cat about to receive a hypodermic injection commented that it hoped the needle was not as blunt as usual. A monkey in a cage made derogatory remarks to the janitor. A hamster sang "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere," followed by "In the Land of the Sky-Blue Water" in a scratchy voice. By noontime the laboratory was empty of personnel. Some had gone off to get

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drunk, the rest had gone off to see their psychiatrists. Miss Pritchard sat down to rest on a laboratory stool — her chest-protector made an admirable cushion— and gloated over her triumph. She knew, of course, that she had succeeded only in a temporary interruption of the laboratory's activities, and had not yet reformed the personnel, merely sent them to bars or couches. But she planned return visits, if her invisibility lasted long enough. After a good rest she negotiated the long walk back to Beacon Hill.

Miss Pritchard also rested from her labors the following day, and read the morning paper very carefully. It was disappointing to discover that the goings-on at Harvard were not reported, for she had hoped to be able to write a Letter to the Editor to the effect that the laboratory was a madhouse as well as a torture-chamber. However, she was delighted to find that the Mayor was going to make an important speech at a public function on the following evening, and that it would be locally aired and televised. She abandoned her plan for the Mr. Williams bat, and worked out another strategy. At first it called for no props at all, but later she went up attic and fetched down her father's old trombone, just in case it should be useful.

The Honorable William X. Flannery, Mayor of Boston, was a large, florid man with a warm smile and a magnificent voice. Even the denizens of Beacon Hill admitted that although the Mayor was probably dishonest and certainly Irish, his voice was magnificent. It was almost a musical instrument, of faultless timbre, and he "played" it splendidly. His specialty was the long crescendo, building dramatically up and up from a resonant whisper to a golden roar. Moreover, his diction was as cultivated as any that could be heard in the parlors of the Cabots and the Lowells.

On this particular evening, he began as usual in a conversational tone. This established him with his audience as a common man, the still-humble son of a humble plumber. The symphonic effects would come later. This was a crucial speech for him, because he hoped soon to be chosen as candidate for the governorship of Massachusetts. The hall was full, the audience—after several dull speeches—was with him from the beginning, and

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Mayor Flannery warmed to his task of making this the finest performance of his career.

Meanwhile, Miss Pritchard, clad in full armor and clutching the trombone, had penetrated the backstage regions of the hall, and was carefully proceeding toward the stage. That afternoon she had acquired a pair of white sneakers, and was wearing them now, so her footsteps went unheard as she worked her way forward to the right-hand wing of the stage. Then she stood waiting. What she waited for was the first of the Mayor's famous crescendo passages. She intended to open her campaign against him during the dramatic pause which always preceded the full golden roar of the climax, and there was no use going out onto the stage until he had begun the resonant whisper. Then, he would have the audience so spellbound that nobody would notice even if she dropped the trombone.

She did not have to wait long. The conversational tone fell away, and that rich, deep, vibrating whisper began. Miss Pritchard smiled a smile of confident invisibility and inevitable triumph, and tiptoed forward out of the wings onto the stage, past the seated dignitaries, toward the Mayor at the microphone.

The scene which followed is one of the great scenes in the annals of Boston politics, and of the television industry as well. Quite unbeknownst to herself, Miss Pritchard had suddenly become visible again, during the last moments of her waiting in the wings. Now, as she began her slow and cautious progress over the stage, she was seen in the glare of the footlights by three or four thousand pairs of eyes. The Mayor's rising eloquence was hypnotic, but it could not compete with the spectacle presented by Miss Pritchard. A moment later—when the astonished operator had swung his camera around—she was visible to thousands more watching TV at home.

Her appearance was greeted by a soft gasp of astonishment from the audience. The Mayor took it as a tribute to the resonance of his whisper, and spoke on, while Miss Pritchard was so intent upon her tiptoeing that she did not hear it. The seated dignitaries were so flabbergasted they merely stared wide-eyed without attempting to stop her.

So the Mayor continued to orate, and Miss Pritchard continued to advance upon

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him across the stage. She was wearing the football helmet with its nose-guard. She was carrying the slide trombone. The umpire's chest-protector was slung across her rump, and swung out a little and slapped back at each step. Her patrician feet were shod in the white sneakers. Of all the strange sights on television, none has ever matched this; perhaps none ever will.

At last, while the audience waited in silent and pop-eyed suspense, Miss Pritchard reached the Mayor's side. He still had not noticed her, and had climbed from his resonant whisper into his ringing middle-tone, on the way to the golden roar. Then, as she waited confidently for his dramatic pause, still thinking herself invisible, suddenly he noticed her beside him. He swung around, stared wildly at her bizarre get-up, and said in a whisper more vibrant than any he had ever used in a speech, "Mary and Joseph!"

Miss Pritchard was startled when the Mayor turned to stare at her. She glanced down at herself, discovered that the charm had worked off, and delivered a comment of her own. What she said—and she was so close to the microphone that it was heard by the "live" audience, the TV audience, and the radio audience—was later reported rather less vigorously by the newspapers, but there are thousands of Massachusetts witnesses to what she *really* said. It was, "I'll be goddamned, I'm visible again." Since only Miss Pritchard knew that she had ever *not* been visible, this enigmatic and unladylike r e m a r k stunned everybody into continued silence. There was not a sound in the hall as she unslung the chest-protector, laid it on the floor, placed the helmet on top of it, cast the Mayor a haughty glance, and then walked majestically off the stage and out the wings, her father's trombone under her arm. Nobody made a move to stop her, and she walked on out of the hall and back home to Beacon Hill.

Normalcy has come back to the Pritchard residence now, and the days pass in good order as they ought to do. Beacon Hill has stopped discussing the affair, though the Merriam woman was in an absolute tizzy for weeks. The conversations in the stately parlors no longer turn to the riddle of her famed remark. That deep, conservative, affluent peace—almost indistinguishable from death—has returned. **THE END**

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You Can Live Forever

BY MILTON LESSER

You spend a couple of years in Korea, brother, and all you can think of is home and the little woman. Then the day comes when both are just around the corner. You run up the steps and put the key in the door and walk in . . . and bump into a tough guy and a strange woman.

Your wife? Never heard of her. See the super. So you see the super. You know him and he knows you. Only he insists you never had a wife. Little man, what now?

IT WAS hot up there on the third floor, but not so hot or so dusty as Korea had been two months ago. I got the duffle bag off my shoulder and squinted the sweat from my eyes, digging into my pocket for the key to our apartment. The tumblers fell. I took a deep breath, twisted the doorknob and pushed the door in.

A man in undershorts padded toward the open doorway and scowled at me. A sleazy woman in a slip sat behind him sipping a drink and sweating.

"How in hell'd you get that key, soldier?"

"It's mine. It's my apartment."

He had a nasty laugh. "Get lost before I call the super."

"Now, Harry," the woman said. "There must be some mistake."

"Get lost, corporal. Blow."

I checked the apartment number stenciled on the door. 3-E. If there was a mistake, it wasn't mine. Then I smiled. "Maybe you're some of Karen's relatives she never told me about."

"Don't know no Karen."

"Karen Meadows. My wife."

"Never heard of her. Are you going to scram?"

"Now, wait a minute."

"You wait. I'm gonna call the cops." Stubby hands shoved against my starched khaki shirt. "Unless you scram."

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I got hold of his wrists and watched him wince. Karen had stopped writing to me six months ago, suddenly. No explanation. "I'm sorry, mister. Maybe she sub-let the apartment to you. Mrs. Karen Meadows?"

"We rented from the real estate agency." He was busy massaging his hurt wrists and looking at me with grudging respect. "Gladys, you go down and get the super."

I said that would be fine and watched his wife slip on a faded housecoat, take one more sip from her frosted glass, edge out the doorway sideways and clomp downstairs on wooden mules, calling, "Mr. Golden. Oh you, Mr. Golden!"

When another doorway on the landing began to open, the man remembered he was wearing nothing but undershorts and a scowl. He backed into the apartment and tried to shut the door. I poked my foot in the way and followed him and then swallowed hard looking at the furnished apartment where Karen and I had spent our three nights together before I caught a plane for Fort Lawton and shipped out to FECOM.

A few moments later, Mr. Golden followed Gladys into the apartment. He wore gold-rimmed glasses and a cheap pocket watch pinned to his white shirt. I could hear it ticking clear across the room. He grinned at me and slapped my back and said, "Phil Meadows! You're looking good, boy."

"You know this queer?" The man named Harry seemed surprised.

"Know him? Fourteenth Street's favorite bachelor. You bet."

"Mr. Golden. I'm married now. What do you mean, bachelor?"

"That so? Never would of thought it. Congratulations."

I wondered if nightmares could be so real and what was the best way of pinching myself awake. Sweat had begun pasting the khaki shirt to my shoulders. "But you know my wife. Karen. We lived here."

"Now you're pulling my leg, Phil."

"Damnit, we had you up for beer a couple of times."

"You sure did. Wasn't no woman, though."

"Just tell this smart alec to get the hell out of here, Mr. Golden. Some soldier."

"Now, Harry."

"Say it, Phil. You been pulling our leg, ain't you, boy?"

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"You're crazy," I said. "You're all crazy."

Harry lit a cigarette, picked the phone off its cradle, and dialed operator. "Hello? I want the police."

Mr. Golden rushed across the room and depressed the cradle with his fingers, staring first at Harry then at me and shaking his head. "It's too hot, fellahs."

"Listen, Golden. We don't have to take this kind of stuff from any bum who walks in."

"It's their apartment now, Phil," Mr. Golden told me. "Maybe you better leave."

"I'll leave, as soon as this makes sense. After my wife left here, where did she go?"

"I never met your wife. If you're married."

"She stopped writing all of a sudden. Did she tell you to say that?"

"I never met the woman."

"We had a lease here till I got back. So Karen would have a place to stay."

"You lived here alone. You gave up the place before you went overseas."

"Nuts! Nuts to all of you."

"Phil. Maybe you ought to rest a while."

"Get your hands off me!"

"I know a good doctor, Phil. Cheap, too."

"Get your filthy hands . . ." Suddenly, it was too hot in there, too close, reeking too much of gin and stale cigars, and unwashed bodies.

Sure, they'd had me in the psycho ward for a while in Korea, after Karen stopped writing. No Dear John letter, no hint of trouble, no warning. It was as if she had ceased to exist. After a month of it I'd asked for an emergency furlough and after they turned it down I went awol from the truce line and back through Taegu and all the way south to Pusan, where they caught me trying to stow away aboard an outbound troopship. I needed mental hygiene, they said, because the chaplain couldn't help. The Red Cross had tried to contact Karen for me, ten thousand miles away in New York. No soap.

Now it all came rushing back and I shouldered Mr. Golden aside, got the duffle bag over my shoulder again. *It was as if Karen had ceased to exist.* On the street it was no better, with the tenements lined up like cardboard against the hot, murky sky. People looked at me. I ran.

I took a room in the midtown Y.M.C.A., shaved, showered, climbed into the one suit of civilian clothes I owned, and thought. Either Karen

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was or Karen wasn't. Simple. If she wasn't, it meant I was off my rocker, but good. But how could you imagine all that? The way her blue eyes got all misty when she said I love you, Phil, I love you. The way she stretched in the morning, languidly, the long golden curves of her. The way her lips tasted. The vows, the promises, the hopes. . .

Three days and three nights of paradise, then Korea and — nightmare. There had to be an explanation.

There wasn't one at the license bureau.

"It's about a marriage license," I told the clerk behind the wicker grill.

"Want one? Lady's got to be here."

"Do you keep records of last year?"

"What do you want?"

"My wife and I lost our marriage license."

"Name?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Philip J. Meadows."

"When did you apply?"

"Last July 2nd."

"What are you so nervous about, Mr. Meadows?"

"It's nothing."

"Here we go now." He took out a ledger and thumbed through it. "July 2nd, you say?"

"Yes."

"You sure it was July?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm sure."

"Don't get upset." More thumbing through the ledger. "Philip Meadows, you say? Funny."

"What's funny?"

"You didn't apply for a license here."

"Right here. At this window!"

"Stop hollering, Mr. Meadows. Say, are you all right?"

"Let me see that book."

"Against the regulations. Sure it was July?"

"Goddamn you! What are you hiding it for? What are you all hiding it for?"

"People are waiting, Mr. Meadows."

"Give me that book."

The clerk slammed the grill down in front of his window and leaned his thumb against a buzzer. Two uniformed policemen moved into the room swiftly, silently. "All right, mac."

"I'm going. You don't have to shove me."

There was no explanation at Karen's folks' house in Queens, either.

"It's me, Phil. I'm home."

"Phil who, for heaven's sake?"

"Mom Peters. It's me, your son-in-law."

"Come again, young man?"

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"Karen's husband."

"Karen?"

"Your daughter."

"I've got no daughter old enough to marry. You must have the wrong address."

"You're Mom Peters, that's not wrong."

"I never saw you before in my life, really."

"She's got to be here some place."

"Is this some kind of salesman's stunt? It's not funny."

"What happened to Karen?"

"I think you'd better go."

A little girl came skipping up the walk, bouncing a big red ball. "Momie? Momie, who's the man yelling at?"

"It's all right, Sally. He's going. This is my daughter, mister. The only one I've got."

"You're Mom Peters. You were at the wedding. You told me to consider you my mother. You helped Karen find the apartment. Didn't you? Didn't you?"

"You're frightening Sally, mister."

"He looks mad, momie."

"I'm sorry. I don't know. I don't know what." I turned around and walked back down the path to the street. I didn't have to see Mom Peters to know she was shaking her head sadly before she shut the door.

I checked the neighborhood school where Karen said she had attended. No record of her. I tried the neighborhood church. The minister was friendly but couldn't remember any Karen Meadows nee Peters. You married us, I told him frantically. ("Now, son.") She had no rating with the Credit Bureau, which meant she had never made a purchase on time, never opened a charge account, never paid rent, never, never, never.

What did you do next? Surrender yourself to the V.A. and make a reservation for the first available bunk in the psycho ward? Put an ad in the paper saying, *Karen, all is confusion, come home to Phil? You do so exist?*

Back at the Y.M.C.A., I unpacked my duffle and found the cigar box of letters from Karen. I took them out of their envelopes, still smelling faintly of perfume. They were real. I could feel the paper crinkle between my fingers. I could see Karen's handwriting, bold for a woman, the t's crossed firmly, the exclamation points after "I love you" large and dark. I had no picture. I'd lost Karen's picture when our bunker

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in Korea caught fire. I could hardly remember what she looked like.

Only the letters. The last one. . . .

". . . a peculiar ad in today's paper, Phil. I think I'll answer it for kicks. Listen to this. 'YOU CAN LIVE FOREVER! Incredible? Impossible? Not for *Eternities, Incorporated.* This offer is open to a limited number of people who have enough imagination to believe. If you really want to live forever, without growing old, see Mr. Shardock at 1675 Broadway.'

"Honest, Phil. That's what it says, word for word. Nutty, isn't it, darling? It kind of makes you think, though. What if a person could really and truly live forever, always young and handsome, like you? I'd be able to keep on loving you more and more every day and. . . . But it's all too impossible. Still, Mr. Shardock (what an improbable name!) should be good for a couple of laughs and things are so slow for me here without you that I'm going to pay this Mr. Shardock a visit. I'll write you about it tomorrow, Phil honey.

"I love you! I love you so much, my darling . . ."

There had never been another letter. Only this last one about Mr. Shardock and *Eternities, Incorporated.* That was peculiar. I'd forgotten all about it until now, as if there had been a block inside my brain preventing me from remembering it. Repression? Suppression? Whatever word the psychologists use. Karen's letter had triggered my memory and now I could recall how I'd written back to say that Mr. Shardock was probably nutty as a fruitcake and she ought to be careful with people like that.

It was six o'clock now, too late to visit this Mr. Shardock in his office. I was pacing back and forth and kneading my hands together. This Shardock. A phony. Some kind of shady dealings and Karen had got wise to them. They might have done something to her. They might have. . . .

I stretched out on the bed, naked, but didn't sleep. I lay there sweating and stewing and waiting for the morning. By nine o'clock I was outside Mr. Shardock's office on the tenth floor. *Shardock Enterprises* was lettered on the smoked glass door. A typewriter was click-clacking inside.

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"I'd like to see Mr. Shardock," I told the receptionist.

"You have an appointment?"

"No."

The red-headed receptionist sat in a small cubicle of a room, with a heavy door behind her. "What is this in reference to, Mr. . . . ?"

"Meadows. It's about my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Six months ago she answered an advertisement placed in one of the local newspapers by Mr. Shardock."

"Not by Mr. Shardock. Not our Mr. Shardock. We don't advertise."

"Now, just a minute."

"You have the wrong office."

"We'll see about that!"

"You can't go in there, Mr. Meadows."

"Then stop me."

"Keep away from that door."

Abruptly, the door opened inward. I lost my balance and stumbled after it, then heard it slam behind me. Two men were standing there, one on either side of me. They were big and they looked tough.

"Wacha want, bo?"

"I'm looking for Shardock."

"He ain't here now."

"This advertisement. About living forever?"

"About what?" The man on my left sucked in his breath like he'd been underwater and had come up for a long gulp of oxygen.

"Eternities, Incorporated?"

"Say it again, bo."

" 'You can live forever?' 'See Mr. Shardock?' This is the right Shardock?"

"I guess it is, bo." The man seemed to regret it.

"Well, my wife was here and—"

"Lookit here," said the man on the left.

I turned to face him, but caught a blur of motion out of the corner of my eye. I whirled and got a fistful of knuckles in my mouth. It slammed me back across the hallway and against the wall.

"What the hell!"

"Pick him up, Sammy."

Sammy got around behind me and tugged me to my feet. I knuckled blood away from my bruised lips. Sammy was holding me with one arm up and back in a hammerlock. If I moved he could break the bone.

"Where'd you hear about that, bo?"

"This ad. My wife . . ."

"You said that. Wanta get out of here alive?"

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I didn't answer. I was in trouble and didn't know why, but after the way everyone had looked at me with eyes that said I was crazy, it was almost a relief.

"I ast you."

"That's all I know."

"Inside, Sammy."

Sammy pushed me ahead of him through the hallway to an office with two desks, two chairs and some filing cabinets. There were no windows, but fluorescent lights gleamed on the stark white walls. Sammy relaxed his hammerlock.

There was this blob in the white, white room, his fist, floating at me and growing large and exploding, then receding in a red fog and floating at me again and bursting. There was a clock ticking someplace, far away, each tick slow and distinct and loud like the flat, cracking sound of a rifle.

"My damned knuckles hurt."

"You want I should try?" Sammy's friend said.

"No. Wait a minute. You think maybe we ought to call Shardock?"

"Dunno."

"We're liable to kill this guy."

"So?"

"So, we don't do any of the killing."

"He ought to talk."

The vultures, come to argue over my body.

"He ain't gonna. You better call Shardock on the phone."

My head was swimming in the red fog. Nothing figured. Nothing. They were gunsels, hoods, thugs. The common garden variety you could find prowling around looking for work now that they had cleaned up the waterfronts. What did they have to do with Mr. Shardock and living forever and Karen, who had come here six months ago and then vanished, not only in the flesh, but in the memory of Mr. Golden, and at the license bureau, at school, church, the Credit Bureau, even her mother?

Sammy sloshed water over me and rubbed my bleeding face with a towel, cleaning me up for Mr. Shardock. In such capable hands and without a thing in the world to worry about, I lost consciousness.

"You're answering the ad?" someone said. I blinked at him, then got my eyes open and squinted in the bright light. He had a large nose on an otherwise nondescript face, except for the eyes. The eyes,

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small and gray, belonged to a poker player. He was about fifty and well dressed if you liked your fashions a little on the loud side.

"I just want to see Mr. Shardock."

"I am Shardock."

"My wife . . ."

"I know all about your wife."

I was no longer tied to the chair. I sat there feeling completely washed out, except for my face which was numb. Sammy stood across the room with this .45. His friend was not here.

"You were away, Mr. Meadows?"

"Korea."

"Then that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"How you could remember. The distance, you know."

"I don't know anything."

"I advise you to go home and forget all about this, Mr. Meadows."

"But my wife . . ."

"You no longer have a wife. Karen Meadows does not exist. You're convinced of that by now?"

"Everyone sure tried to convince me."

"*I* tried, Mr. Meadows."

"I don't get it."

"She—isn't."

"You rotten, no good . . ." I tried to stand up, but was still too weak. "You killed her."

"She's not dead. She's a blank. A never-was."

"Even her mother . . ."

"All records of her are gone. All memory, except yours. That is why you pose a problem."

"I'm going to take what I know to the cops."

"I told you, boss," Sammy growled.

"What will you take to the police? That your wife is missing? What wife?"

"I have her letters."

"Letters from a cipher, a a zero, a blank."

"I don't get it."

"I could make you forget, like the others."

He stared me down. Maybe he could, at that.

"But after all, you did answer the ad. We need people."

"If you think I'm going to . . ."

"You are going. Get out, Mr. Meadows."

"Aw, boss."

"It's all right, Sammy. Show him to the door."

Sammy motioned me to my feet. "I'll come back," I said. "I'll come back."

"I'm sure you will."

"You'll wish you'd killed me."

"Show him out, Sammy."

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"I'll get you if it's the last thing I do."

"Good-bye, Mr. Meadows."

"We're not through with each other, Shardock."

"I know it."

Sammy opened the door and walked through behind me.

The receptionist was typing and didn't look up. Sammy waited until the elevator opened for me, the gun in his pocket. He was still waiting there when the elevator door closed and the cage started down.

Out on the street, Karen was waiting for me.

She was tall and tawny of skin and hair, the hair longer than most women could wear it, the eyes blue over high cheekbones and misty like when she said I love you. She wore a green blouse opened at the throat and a flaring green skirt. She was beautiful.

I gaped at her and off somewhere on all sides of us the crowds were floating by, just floating by, perfectly unreal, imagined, less than imagined. They didn't matter. They made a murmur of noise, the talking, the cars on the street, the cop blowing his whistle far away.

"Phil, darling."

I held her against me and her heart was fluttering too. "You're here. You're real."

"Don't ask any questions." Her finger touched my lip. I kissed it.

"But you . . . they . . . we . . ."

"Sh. I have an apartment for us, Phil. For tonight."

"They all say you don't . . ."

"Phil, please."

"Well, I've got to know."

"And champagne and a good dinner. Steak."

"Everyplace I went, they said . . ."

But she'd tucked her arm under mine and she was warm and firm against it. We merged with the crowd and we started walking. I looked at my watch. Five o'clock. I'd been unconscious hours. I looked at Karen. Her eyes were misty. She was beautiful. We kept walking.

The place was over in the East Forties, all mirrored walls and modern furniture. Karen walked straight into the kitchen and closed the door behind her, smiling. I could hear her puttering around with dishes and pots. I grinned foolishly at myself in one of the mirrored walls. Everything was going to be all right. Everything was going to be fine.

Except that I looked like

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hell. I could stand a shave and some cold compresses for the swellings on my face. I wanted to barge into the kitchen and get hold of Karen and kiss her, but somehow it didn't seem right. It was her show and I'd let her do it her way.

In the bathroom, I found a razor in the medicine cabinet, and shaved with it. I showered with ice cold water and began to feel better. There were pajamas waiting for me in the bedroom, and a lounging robe. All the commonplaces. As if I'd never been away and all this had not happened.

"Soup's on, Phil."

She'd set the dinner table for us, but I wasn't thinking of food when I walked into the kitchen. Karen saw that look in my eye and told me not yet, this was going to be our night, our one night, and there was time.

"Just one night, Karen?"

"How do you like the salad?"

"Good," I said, and ate. "It's really good."

I uncorked the magnum of iced champagne and we killed it by the time we worked our way through rare steak, baked potatoes and salad to dessert. There were bubbles behind my eyes, little bubbles going around and around.

"The dishes can wait," Karen told me, as if all this was part of a play, the stage set, the lines rehearsed, the drama learned by rote.

I padded into the bedroom and lay down on the bed with my fingers laced behind my head. Inside, the shower was hissing. The room was very quiet except for that. It was growing dim. I closed my eyes and thought of Karen and how she said tonight was our night, our one night, and of Karen long ago when we had three days together, just three days as man and wife, before I shipped out to the Far East. I must have dozed off.

"Sleepy head."

"Huh? Karen."

She was hovering over me in the darkness, hardly seen. She was a supple brightness among the shadows of the room, a fragrance in the hot still air. She was cool to the touch, her skin coolly damp from the shower, her hair a net of perfumed silk. And I was a damned fool, for I said, "What do you know about Shardock?"

"I said don't ask questions!"

"How did you know I'd be outside his office?"

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"Phil, please."

"What happened to you? What happened?"

"You're making things difficult."

"I'm your husband."

"Then prove it." And she was in my arms, melting there in the darkness.

Something cold touched the skin of my leg. Something sharp pierced the skin, like a needle. I sat bolt upright and heard a rustling sound as Karen moved away from me. "What the hell did you do?"

She didn't answer. She sat there in the dimness, her back toward me. I groped for the light-switch on the night-table and began to feel giddy, like I'd been falling a long distance, rolling over and over. I couldn't catch my breath.

It was a needle. She'd taken me here for that, for the needle. I found the hypodermic on the bed and flung it with all my strength against the wall. "Why?" I said. "Why?"

She stood up and walked from the room, ignoring me. I no longer existed. I staggered to my feet and started after her. When I reached the doorway I collapsed.

Sunlight poured in through the windows. My throat was parched and I went into the bathroom, leaned over the sink and drank water from the tap. Karen wasn't anyplace in the apartment, but I found a note on the kitchen table. The dishes had been washed and put away.

Phil: Mr. Stanley Fuller of 420 Bone Street, Queens, is waiting to orient you. This is deadly serious. You won't live three days unless you see Mr. Fuller. Karen.

No misty eyes.

To orient me? I dressed and went downstairs to a drugstore for some coffee, then found a phone booth and asked the information operator for the number of Stanley Fuller, Bone Street, Queens.

His phone went click on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Fuller? This is Phil Meadows."

"We're waiting for you, Mr. Meadows."

"Waiting?"

"The orientation."

"But . . ."

"I'm a doomed man, Mr. Meadows. Please hurry."

I walked out into the street and found an Independent Subway which would take me to Queens. I wasn't asking myself any questions. I was just going. I wondered if a

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sick man really and truly thinks everything is happening like this. A lunatic.

"You're Meadows, of course. Come in."

I followed Stanley Fuller into his ground-floor apartment. He was my height, but slimmer. He had a worn, almost ascetic look on his face.

We entered a living room and sat down, Fuller alongside a girl with short dark hair who was sitting on the sofa, trim legs tucked under her sideways, nervous fingers worrying the fabric of the clinging white blouse she wore. I sat oppósite them on an easy chair.

Fuller studied his hands, which were trembling. "I'm doomed," he said with the same hopeless tone he'd used over the phone. He was pretty young, about thirty. The girl couldn't have been more than twenty-one or two.

"That's what I get for trying to help Shardock. Doomed."

"Look, I was told you'd orient me about something."

"I know. Look at my hands, Mr. Meadows."

I examined his hands. I counted the fingers and found the usual number and said, "Is this some kind of a gag?"

"Do you see any wrinkles?"

"No. No, I don't."

"No wrinkles? No wrinkles. Well, soon. Even the doomed have their roles to play for Shardock. Do you see any wrinkles, Miss Wilder?"

"Not me."

"You are both going to live forever, you know. I could have lived forever too, if I hadn't defaulted."

"I'm so afraid," Miss Wilder said.

Fuller was cringing more abjectly than she was. From himself, I thought.

"O.K.," I told him. "You're doomed. And we're going to live forever. Now will you please get a few things straight? I came here because I was told it's important. I'm not leaving until you answer some questions."

"Naturally."

"Even if I have to hammer the answers out of you."

"You both answered an advertisement. You both received injections of a hormone called etergen. You were both sent here."

"They gave me plane tickets from Detroit," Miss Wilder said.

"The hormone actually works, although you'll need a booster shot within three days and periodic injections of etergen every three months after that."

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"What do you mean it works?"

"Immortality. You don't grow old. You'll live—and live and live."

"Sure, and Lichtenstein is going to conquer the world with a navy of three rowboats."

"It works, Mr. Meadows. A human being grows old, suddenly unable to replenish decaying tissues. But a starfish can grow new limbs, or a salamander. Etergen, you see. You'll never age, never die. Provided you keep in Shardock's good graces and get your etergen every three months."

"I'm listening."

"But not believing. Well, I'll be the proof myself before too long. I'm doomed, you see."

"You already said that."

"I am. I was given an assignment. I thought it would do Shardock more harm than good. I questioned him, but he said do it. I was too late. That was two months ago, thirty days after my last etergen injection. They'll not give me another."

"I'd like to know . . ."

Fuller held up a hand for silence. "Please, I can feel it. I haven't much time. Ten years ago, Shardock was a patent attorney making a good living, but not getting rich. A man came to Shardock with etergen. Shardock killed him after he found that etergen actually worked. But it does something to the body, it changes the endocrine balance. Taken and boosted and renewed every three months, etergen will keep you constantly, vigorously healthy—indefinitely. But if one injection is missed, the result is fatal. Sudden premature senility, in a matter of minutes.

"So Shardock runs his advertisements periodically in various cities, gets his people, and uses them. Yes, you'll live forever, but more a slave to Shardock than any man was ever slave before or any man master. If you don't obey, no more etergen. You die."

"The police," Miss Wilder said.

"For two reasons, they're not interested. In the first place, your past is erased. Right now the job is being done. Records are destroyed by Shardock's agents. People who knew you are hypnotized . . ."

"Hypnotized?" I thought of all the wild fantasies you can read these days simply by visiting the nearest newsstand and scooping up a handful. I looked at Stanley

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Fuller's ascetic face and did not know what to believe.

"Yes, hypnotized. It can be done. It's as thorough as an F.B.I. investigation, carried out by trained hypnotists who have taken etergen. Post-hypnotic suggestions are given, and people don't remember you. No records of your birth, your social security, your auto license, your schooling, your baptism, are left. No memories are left. You cease to exist. You become someone else. You're not 'missing.' You aren't anything.

"And death comes by sudden premature senility, remember. An unknown old man dies, without identification, with no one to claim the body. Why should the police be particularly interested? Senile people die all the time."

"What kind of work do you people do for Shardock?" I asked. Let him tell the whole thing, the whole impossible story. He'd trip himself up. He had to.

"We kill his enemies. We steal for him. We cheat for him. We lie. We embezzle. We play the confidence game. We get down and lick his feet if he wants. We are given etergen every three months."

"Why are you telling us all this?"

"Because someone told me. Because it's done that way. Because I'm hoping against hope Shardock may change his mind about me. Because . . . I don't know why." Stanley Fuller stood up and held his hands in front of his face. "I'm thirsty," he said. "A drink of water, please."

Miss Wilder got up and headed for the kitchen.

"My hands! Look at my hands now!"

I looked, and saw the veins bulging, thick like rope, the skin stretched tight and suddenly translucent. Stanley Fuller sank back in his chair, burying his face in his hands. I wanted to turn away. I could do nothing but stare at him, my throat working, my lips dry. I heard Miss Wilder coming back from the kitchen. "Don't come in here," I said.

She entered the room with a glass of water. It dropped at her feet, the water spreading on the floral design of the carpet.

Trembling all over, Stanley Fuller struggled to his feet. His blue serge suit was too large for him. His hands were gnarled claws, clutching and unclutching at air. The flesh had shrunken horribly

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on his face. The eyes protruded. His skin was wax.

"Etergen," he gasped, and tumbled to the floor.

I kneeled at his side and picked up the withered hand. There was no pulse.

"He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Look at him. No, better not."

She was crying without making a sound, her back shaking under the white blouse. I went to the phone, dialed operator and asked for the police.

"Put that phone down, you fool"

"We've got to tell the police."

"Hang up."

I dropped the receiver back to its cradle.

"What's the matter, Mr. Meadows, are you crazy or something? Call the police and we'll live exactly three days." She had shut off the crying like a faucet. She hiccuped.

"Surely you don't believe that cockeyed story?"

"Look at Mr. Fuller."

"Even if it's true, what can we do? When they find Fuller in here, they'll know something's fishy. He was a young man. A man of thirty."

"Then we'll have to take him out somewhere."

"Now who's crazy?"

"You are if you don't. It's our only hope. Dump him someplace."

Shardock would figure we'd do exactly that. It was part of the plan. One of his people orient two new ones, then they dispose of the body. And hope he'd contact them with the etergen.

"All we have to do is wait for night."

"What do you mean?"

"And . . . and put him outside somewhere. He's not Stanley Fuller anymore."

"Then just go away?"

"Yes, Mr. Meadows."

"And forget about our consciences?"

"I don't want to die, do you?"

"That's besides the point."

"Do you want to die?"

"What do you think?"

"Then it's not besides the point. I think I'll go inside and lie down. I don't feel so good."

Which left me with the corpse. I stared at it. At him, thirty years old. He looked closer to a hundred.

The phone began to ring.

It kept on ringing and ringing.

I sat there and clenched my fists and waited for it to stop.

Half an hour later, it was

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the doorbell. I sat very still. I didn't make a sound. I was one of them now. When he went away I tip-toed around the house pulling down shades and drawing curtains. Miss Wilder was on the bed, moaning in her sleep.

I was a sitting, staring, gaping dead man. I had death in my veins, put there by Karen, without misty eyes. Shardock had instructed her to give me the etergen. Could I blame her?

The phone rang again.

I jumped, headed for it. Maybe it was Shardock calling about our booster shots. Maybe nothing. If I answered the phone, we were in trouble. I let it ring. The pulled down shades and drawn curtains had made the air in the apartment almost stifling. My shirt was plastered against me with sweat.

It was not even one o'clock.

I was thirsty and hungry but couldn't bring myself to leave the room in which Stanley Fuller had died. I got up and walked around, feeling stiff and tired. Miss Wilder was still moaning softly inside. On a desk in one corner of the room I found a thick scrap book divided into three sections, with a different color paper for each one.

The first section contained scores of small newspaper clippings, each no more than five or six lines and each so much like the others that, except for time and location, they could have been mimeographed.

Early this morning, police found the body of an unidentified man in an alley behind the State Theater on 16th Street. The man lay where he had apparently fallen the night before. Pending an autopsy, the police medical examiner maintains that death was probably from natural causes. The man was in his eighties.

Stanley Fuller had been morbidly fascinated by the nature of his own eventual demise, almost as if he had expected to cross Shardock fatally at some time.

The second and third sections of his scrapbook contained pictures of important political events and business conferences, also gleaned from newspapers and newsmagazines. In each picture a small face in the background had been circled. When I brought the pages up close to my eyes, the circled faces all seemed to belong to the same man. He had attended the Democratic National Convention and the Republican

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Convention a month earlier. He had been on hand when Universal Motors and Kaysler Cars had traded shares of stock and formed the giant of the motor industry. He had stood two rows back to the President's left at the signing of the latest NATO agreement. I couldn't be sure, but he looked like Shardock.

Stanley Fuller had scrawled in the margin: "He's content to remain in the background, but already he's one of the most powerful men in the country. Give him ten more years and he'll rule 165 million Americans ruthlessly. I only hope I can remain in his good graces."

I looked at the ancient corpse on the rug before me. Stanley hadn't.

When it began to grow dark, Miss Wilder came into the living room. "I must have slept a long time," she said.

"Yes."

"It's almost dark."

"I know."

"I was thinking, Mr. Meadows . . ."

"There will be people out on a hot night like this. We have no car. Nothing. We'll be seen."

"I was thinking. This morning when I acted so tough and all, honest, Mr. Meadows, I'm no gangster's moll or anything. Mr. Fuller had already told me what we had to do before you got here, but now . . . Mr. Meadows, I'll never be able to touch him. Never . . ."

"How did you ever get involved like this?"

It was dark now. She was a shadow on the chair in front of me. Stanley Fuller's body was on the floor between us. She sounded as if she wanted desperately to cry, but couldn't.

"Hell week in a college sorority. I had to answer the ad in a Detroit newspaper as a gag. What are we going to do, Mr. Meadows?"

"We have three days."

"We have all the time in the world if we do what Mr. Shardock wants. I could picture the other girls at the sorority. Where's Nina? What happened to Nina?"

"They'll be made to forget all about you."

"If we do what we're supposed to, we'll have all the time in the world, but who wants it, this way? Who wants it?"

"Take it easy, Nina."

"I don't want to live forever, doing everything that man says."

"I don't think I'd want to live forever in any event.

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They say a man lives a full life and then gets tired. Maybe it's God's way of making room." Me. Getting religious.

"In the bedroom, I was thinking. It's not right."

"We'll have to go now, Nina. We'll have to take Fuller outside."

I stood up and approached the corpse.

"Don't! Please. I can't. I can't!"

"Three days, and then we'll need a booster."

"I just can't."

"If we leave him here in Stanley Fuller's apartment, an old man, with Stanley Fuller missing, a young man . . ."

"I don't care. I just can't do it."

"Fuller said etergen changes the body chemistry, but Shardock must realize he could make mistakes. Maybe there's an antidote."

"It's hopeless, anyway. We'd never get it. But I just can't touch . . . him."

"I could do it myself."

"Are you going to?"

I thought about it. I'd been thinking about it all day. I'd just needed a push. "No," I said.

"I don't know why, but I'm glad. I'm glad."

"Let's get out of here." I crossed the room to Nina and took her hand, leading her to the door. In some ways, she was like a little girl. But what she had decided not to do had taken courage. I could not help comparing her with Karen, who had given her own husband etergen because Shardock wanted it that way.

We opened the door and walked out into the night, a man and a girl futilely heroic. Today was Wednesday. On Saturday we'd grow old suddenly and die the way Stanley Fuller had died.

"This is the place," I told Nina on Thursday morning.

"I don't see any Shardock listed in the directory."

"It's 1675 Broadway. I wouldn't forget the building."

We found the building manager in an office at the rear of the lobby. "Shardock Enterprises," I said. "Where did they move?"

"Shardock?"

"Yes. Tenth floor?"

"We never had any Shardock here."

"I visited them yesterday."

"Not in this building, you didn't."

He couldn't be argued with. Of course, no one in the entire building would remember Shardock. Nina bit her lip as we went outside. She was not breathlessly beauti-

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ful like Karen, but there was a wholesomeness about her face, a kind of healthy outdoor prettiness. I'd do anything I could to help her. It didn't seem like I could do much.

Next we tried the apartment house on Fourteenth Street where Karen and I had spent our three days of marriage. Mr. Golden was rolling barrels of ashes from the incinerator to the street, piling them outside for the department of sanitation truck.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Golden."

"That's all right. You and the missus want a place?"

"No, I . . ."

"What's the matter, boy?"

"I'm Phil Meadows!"

"Glad to know you, Mr. Meadows. I'd shake, but my hands are all full of ashes."

"You've known me for years."

"Ha-ha. Some mistake. Never saw you before."

"I wanted to look through our old apartment if Gladys and Harry whatever-their-name-is will let me." I was going through the motions. Already I knew it was useless. Now I was like Karen. A cipher. A nothing. I didn't exist.

"You never had an old apartment here."

"Don't you have a Gladys and Harry someone? Doesn't that prove I know them?"

"It doesn't prove a thing. So you know them. So what?"

Nina squeezed my elbow. "What's the use, Phil?"

We walked away, two people without names, without pasts—and probably without any future beyond Saturday. We subwayed back to midtown for a final try at Karen's apartment in the East Forties. I almost expected it to be rented to someone else, but the door opened when I turned the handle and it was empty inside. There was a note on the telephone table, in Karen's handwriting.

I read it aloud to Nina. "Phil: The phone here is registered under the name of George Wilson. That's you. You'll be getting three phone calls from three strangers who you are to orient for us on Saturday morning. Please finish your orientation by eleven a.m. I'm sorry you couldn't follow Mr. Stanley Fuller's advice."

"Eleven o'clock Saturday morning," said Nina.

"It isn't everyone who knows the hour he's supposed to die."

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"Stop talking like that."

"It's pretty clear."

"Phil!"

"I'm sorry. It's just . . ."

"This Karen you told me about. Did you love her very much?"

"I'm all mixed up. I don't know."

"It isn't important."

"Look at me."

"Yes, Phil?"

"It is so important, isn't it?"

"Phil. Oh, Phil." She was crying softly. "Hold me. Please hold me. Just keep on holding me."

"We're not licked yet."

"There's nothing we can do. We have less than forty eight hours."

"If Shardock left New York . . . come on!"

"Where are we going?"

"Just come on."

It was that newsstand on Times Square. You know the one. Papers from all the major cities in the country, every large city you can name.

"We have them all. Every one! . . . What is it, mister? You look like Cleveland to me."

"I'll take one of each."

"One of each? All these papers?"

"Please hurry."

He scurried about the rack, collecting newspapers, plucking them from their positions. "I won't even add it up. Just give me five bucks."

I gave him five of the three hundred Uncle Sam had given me for mustering out pay. The newspapers made quite an armful, which we carried to a bench in the park behind the public library on Fifth Avenue. "Start reading," I told Nina. "The classified ads. And hurry."

Half an hour later, my eyes were getting bleary. Chicago *Tribune*, Washington *Post*, St. Louis *Post Dispatch*, Virginia *Pilot*, *Christian Science Monitor*, Denver *Post*, a dozen other newspapers. Suddenly Nina was poking my arm and pointing.

"Here it is, Phil. Right here."

Her hands were trembling. She held a copy of the Richmond *News Leader*, but I had to steady her hand to read it.

YOU CAN LIVE FOREVER!
Incredible? Impossible?
Not for *Eternities, Incorporated.*

This offer is open to a limited number of people who have enough imagination to believe. If you really want to live forever, without growing

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old, see Mr. Shardock at 1010 Broad Street.

"Nina, I could kiss you."

And I did.

We were a long way from home, but at least now we had a fighting chance.

The New York International Airport's P.A. System blared, "The National Airlines Star for Miami, now loading from Gate Seven. Non-stop to Miami now loading from Gate Seven."

"Excuse me, Miss," I asked the girl at the information desk. "When's the next plane for Richmond, Virginia?" It was now three o'clock Thursday afternoon.

"Coach or express?"

"It doesn't matter. Anything."

"You missed one five minutes ago."

"When's the next one?"

"Here we are. Five o'clock today. The Eastern Sunshine Coach."

I purchased two tickets at the Eastern desk. Nina and I sat around and smoked a couple of cigarettes, then went into the coffee shop for some hamburgers, and finally to the observation deck to watch the big four engine planes take off. A hot wind had sprung up and was blowing dust and papers across the field. Dark thunderheads piled up rapidly, black and ominous. Lightning sundered their leaden bellies and thunder roared sullenly. Then the rain was coming down in driving, blinding sheets. Everyone ran for shelter.

Half an hour later, it was raining harder. Nina nibbled at her fingernails and looked at me without saying anything. You couldn't see a hundred yards outside.

At four-fifteen the P.A. announced that all takeoffs were cancelled until the storm abated. All incoming flights were being rescheduled to Newark Airport, where the storm wasn't so bad. The airport meteorologist said the storm would end by six, possibly earlier.

"Every minute makes it harder, Phil."

"It's eight, nine hours by train to Richmond. We better wait."

"It's six o'clock now."

"What do you want me to do, make it stop raining?"

"I'm sorry, Phil."

"I didn't mean to yell, either. We still have all day Friday."

"Friday."

"We know where Shardock is."

"Only Friday." Nina pick-

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ed up a newspaper from the bench we were sitting on and started to thumb through it. "Look at this, Phil."

It was a story about an unidentified old man found dead in the apartment of one Stanley Fuller, in Queens. Fuller had disappeared and although a preliminary medical investigation indicated death had been by natural causes, the possibility of foul play remained because of Fuller's disappearance. Strangely, Fuller's wallet and driver's license were in the old man's pocket.

"Shardock won't like that," I said.

"We're already eliminated as far as he's concerned. Your wife's note . . ."

"We're still alive."

"It's like Stanley Fuller said about himself. We're doomed."

"Stop that."

"We're dead already. We're as good as dead."

"Stop it, Nina!" I slapped her face because she had begun to giggle hysterically. People looked at us. Nina was all right now, so we got up and walked across the waiting room to the other side.

Our plane took off for Richmond at six forty-five.

We checked into the John Marshall Hotel in Richmond at nine thirty. I signed the register as Mr. and Mrs. George Wilson of New York. It was the first name which occurred to me, the name Karen had mentioned in her note. The name of a doomed man who was supposed to orient three new etergen people back in New York.

We walked the two blocks to Broad Street and found that number 1010 was a two-storey building with stores on the ground floor and offices upstairs. All the windows on the second floor were dark. We could do nothing until tomorrow. Friday. Our last full day.

Back at our hotel room, Nina said, "We can't just walk in there."

"I'll think of something."

"Like what?"

"Something, I don't know."

"We could steal some etergen."

"And then have to steal more in three months? And more after that, knowing that eventually we won't be able to?"

"I don't want to die on Saturday."

"I don't want you to die . . . Nina . . ."

"We'd better get to sleep."

Fully clothed except for her shoes, Nina stretched out

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on the bed. This was some trip to a strange city. We didn't even have toothbrushes. Outside you could hear the traffic dimly on Broad Street, two blocks away. I settled myself in the easy chair opposite the bed and listened to the faint hum of the air-conditioner.

Nina called softly, "You can sleep here if you want."

I didn't touch her. I leaned over and kissed her lightly, on the cheek.

"It's not our last night even if the worst happens, Phil. It's only next to last. I can't think of anything but etergen."

We lay that way, side by side, not touching, like two innocent children. I thought of Karen and then compared her with Nina. I hadn't ever known Karen well, not really. Wartime romance. Quick, fiery passion. Already I thought I knew Nina better. It was as if I had known Nina all my life but was meeting her anew every time she spoke.

"Nina," I whispered.

"Go to sleep. We still have tomorrow."

All night long I was aware of her there beside me.

Leaving the air-conditioned John Marshall Friday morning was like walking into a furnace. It was hot and it was our last full day, but we said nothing about it. We walked to 1010 Broad Street and watched a traffic cop waving the cars forward on the already hot asphalt.

"The police," Nina said, as if she had realized there were such things as policemen for the first time.

"We could prove nothing in one day. We'd be dead before they could do anything."

"You should at least have a gun or something."

I shrugged and took Nina's hand and went upstairs with her. Half a dozen perspiring people sat in the waiting room behind the door marked *SHARDOCK ENTERPRISES.*

"There cain't be no truth in it."

"It's aboot the craziest thing."

"Y'all wait 'n see."

"Yuh cain live fuhevah. Ah declaiah."

I wanted to tell them to run, to get out while they still could. I wanted to tell them about Shardock and Karen and Stanley Fuller and all the Stanley Fullers. I squeezed Nina's hand and said nothing and waited. There was no receptionist. I stood there staring at the

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inner door of the office, wondering what I would do when Shardock or someone opened it from the other side. The door clicked, opened. I held my breath.

Karen stood there, staring at me.

"Phil. You're supposed to be in New York."

"We're here."

"I'm afraid I can't see you."

"Then I'll tell these people a few things."

"You're bluffing."

"Try me."

"You should have listened to Stanley Fuller."

I said I hadn't listened. "Ladies and gentlemen," I began, addressing the half dozen people in the waiting room.

"You stop that," Karen said.

"You've all come here in answer to an advertisement in the *News Leader*. I'd like to tell you what's behind . . ."

"Come on inside, Phil."

Nina said, "That's your wife, isn't it? I'll wait here."

I led her by the arm. "You'll come inside, Nina."

Karen closed the door behind us. The snap lock snicked into place. Karen had a gun.

"You shouldn't have come here, Phil. You should have done all the things you always wanted to do, crowding the hours with them. You're a walking dead man."

"I feel fine."

"I do wish you'd listened."

"You listen. If etergen has changed our body chemistry, there must be something which can change it back."

"You could have taken more etergen. Now Shardock won't give it to you."

"I'm trembling," I said. Nina was.

"Phil, you're a fool. It never could have been the same for us, not after I met Shardock. It's all too big, too overwhelming . . . but I don't hate you. I like you, Phil. Really I do. I thought you'd be grateful. I didn't think you'd . . . well, sign your own death warrant."

"You're top dog now, is that it?"

"Give Shardock five more years. He'll own this country of ours, lock, stock and barrel. He can't be stopped. He's got etergen people in the Senate, in the President's Cabinet, in industry, in the big labor unions, among the top atomic scientists. Not enough yet, but the organization is growing. I'm a part of it."

"I never really knew you," I said. I was talking to con-

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vince myself. Part of me wanted to throttle Karen, but another part wanted to take her in my arms. I looked at Nina. "I wanted roots before I went to Korea. I had no family. Something to come home to. I married you. I was infatuated. I . . . never loved you."

Karen was grinning. Not smiling, just baring her teeth prettily but without mirth. "I suppose this snip of a girl . . ."

"Yes,"

"How touching."

I looked around the office. A desk, a chair, a client chair. A water cooler. Some files. I said, "Where's Shardock?"

"I can't tell you that. I have to see those people." Karen backed around us and sat down at the desk. She held the gun in one hand, picked up the phone, caught it between shoulder and chin, and dialed a number. "Hello, Sammy? Karen. Come on over with a car, will you? Two people to hold on ice until eleven tomorrow morning."

"That wouldn't be Sammy from New York?"

"Oh, was he the one you tussled with in Shardock's office? He doesn't like you."

"Why don't you just shoot us instead of all this fuss?"

"You know why. Death from natural causes."

Karen sat at the desk, staring at her fingerails. I wondered if I could reach her before the gun went off. She probably wouldn't squeeze the trigger unless she had to. But Sammy might take us closer to Shardock, and the answer if there was any.

Half an hour later, Sammy arrived. He growled when he saw it was me. I thought he was going to start cursing, but he said, "Out at the place?"

Karen nodded. "They won't give you any trouble. They don't want to run away. And Sammy?"

"Yeah?"

"No violence, unless you're really provoked. Is that clear?"

Sammy said it was and ushered us downstairs.

A two-door Merc was waiting at the curb. We all three climbed in front and Sammy eased the car into the westbound traffic lanes. Half a mile up Broad, we turned right and headed north on Route 1. No one said anything. I hadn't the slightest idea of trying to escape.

We took a left turn a few miles north of Richmond, the

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tires gouging up a cloud of dust on the dirt road. We drove for about fifteen minutes more and Sammy pulled up in front of an old clapboard farmhouse squatting in the middle of a tract of weed-grown land bordered by what remained of a split-rail fence.

"Is Shardock here?" I asked.

"March inside."

"You haven't . ."

"He *was* here. Move."

Inside, Sammy cooked ham and eggs and served us. You could see it hurt him. He smoked a cigarette, looked at his watch, and put his hat on. He didn't say good-bye, but a moment later Nina and I watched his Merc pull away back down the dirt road. Karen had said we wouldn't try to get away. Now we were left out in the middle of nowhere. Even if we had wanted to leave, there was no place to go. Nina touched my arm.

"It's ten thirty, Phil."

We had twenty four hours and some minutes. It was musty in here, but outside the sun was hot. We could wait for death in the clapboard farmhouse. We could meet it outside in the parched, flat country. If there was another alternative, I failed to see it.

The day wore on. Nina suggested lunch and found provisions in a cupboard. We weren't very hungry and poked at our food. Shardock had been here according to Sammy. Maybe he'd left something which could tell us where he was now. The first floor contained the kitchen, a living room, two bedrooms. The stairway to the second floor had collapsed. There was nothing.

I found two small padlocked metal cases in the basement, which at one time must have been a barn. You could see what was left of the old stalls.

I picked up one of the metal cases, which weighed about thirty pounds. I shook it and heard the sound of glass rattling together inside. I was searching around for a crowbar or something to force the padlock when Sammy's car roared up outside. He must have heard me poking around in the cellar as he approached the house, for he called down through one of the broken windows, "Bring up them two metal boxes, willya bo?"

Outside, I squinted in the strong sunlight and saw that Sammy had opened the trunk of his car. He told me to put the boxes inside. After I had

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done so, he slammed the trunk lid and tested the lock.

"Know what you had there, bo? That was etergen for these here rebels."

"Have you taken etergen, Sammy?"

"Not me. Mr. Shardock said I'm better off without it. At two hundred clams a week, I should care?"

"Been working for Shardock long?"

"Long enough, bo."

"You must be pretty important in the organization."

"Yeah, you might say."

"I'm surprised Shardock doesn't give you etergen."

"Aw, he knows what's best."

"But he takes it, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, Shardock takes it. Yeah."

"Does he have anything against you?"

"No. Hey, what is this?"

"How old are you, Sammy?"

"Thirty-six. Jeez, that ain't old."

"But you could live forever without getting any older."

"Aw, listen bo."

"I'm really surprised."

"Maybe I'll ast him."

"I would if I were you."

"But he already said he doesn't want me to take the stuff."

"You've got it right here."

"Lay off that. I keep my nose clean."

"You're no dope, Sammy."

"So?"

"So you could take it yourself."

"Aw . . ."

"It's right in the trunk of your car."

"Wise guy. You wanta get at it, huh? Just move inside, bo."

I shrugged and started walking. You could almost hear the gears going around inside Sammy's head. I'd started something, all right. If the worst happened and we got nowhere by tomorrow morning, we could at least take the etergen and have three more months to figure things out.

Five minutes later, I regretted my talk with Sammy. Me and my big mouth. He was sitting in the living room and smoking, but crushed the cigarette out suddenly and said, "Maybe I better take that etergen into Richmond right now." He went outside and started up the Merc and disappeared down the road.

"I'm sorry," I told Nina.

"You tried, Phil. That's all you can do."

The sun set around seven-

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thirty. There was a long crimson twilight, fading to mauve and purple darkness. Stars peppered the sky. It was a beautiful night.

Our last night alive.

Sammy hadn't returned yet. We sat in the kitchen. We got up and walked outside, listening to the crickets.

"Talk to me, Phil. Please keep on talking. I don't want to think about tomorrow. I get so scared, just thinking. I keep thinking of Stanley Fuller."

"There, kid. Come on, honey."

"I . . . I'm such a baby. Really, I don't want to cry. I can't help it."

"At least it brought us together. Whatever happens, Nina. I love you."

"You're just saying that because . . . because . . ."

"I love you, Nina."

The ground was soft and still warm from the sun. We forgot all about tomorrow and listened to the crickets chirp. Then we didn't hear the crickets.

Sammy returned at sunrise. He staggered into the house, singing. He'd been drinking and it was a miracle he'd driven the high-powered Merc out here safely in the dim early morning light.

"Wake up, bo. Wake up, my good friend. I wanta tell you what. You're my friend, bo."

I looked at my watch. Five-thirty. I'd be doing a lot of time checking this morning. Five and a half hours.

"Oh, God," Nina said. "It's morning already."

"Lishen, my good friend, my bo friend, my buddy. No one can do that to me, not even Shardock himself or any bo at all. Thank you, my pal bo."

"What are you talking about, Sammy?"

"Me. I'm gonna live to be a thousand million killion, bo. Me and the sun, going around and round and never getting old. You're my real pal, bo. The only one."

"You took etergen?"

"Took it? I'll shay. Not just a couple of drops like Shardock gives, not this bo. Not me. I filled that there needle and took it all. Life juice, bo. Gonna live to be a killion. I'm foreverful grater, forever grateful, bo."

"Then listen. Do me a favor."

"Any little thing at all."

"Where's Shardock?"

"Aw, bo. I can't."

I grabbed a fistful of his sweaty shirt and shook him. "Where's Shardock?"

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"Now, bo."

I slapped his face back and forth. He was blubbering and yelling, but I could still hear my watch ticking the seconds away. "Wet a towel in the bathroom," I told Nina. "I don't like to do this, but we've got to hurry."

She brought the towel to me, heavy with water. I swung it at Sammy and slammed it across his face, rocking his head back savagely. Nina mewed softly and turned away.

I swung the towel again and Sammy collapsed. Sopping full of water like that, it was a truncheon. "Tell me where Shardock is."

Sammy started to get up. I swung the towel like a flail over my head and let him have it. His head struck the old dusty floorboards with a thud and he wasn't moving. I wrung the cool water out over his face and waited until he spluttered and blinked, scowling up at me painfully. All the liquor he'd had would not let his muscles co-ordinate properly. He lay there, arms and legs flapping.

I slapped his face until my hands hurt.

"Where's Shardock?"

I was his pal, all right. His one and only bo-pal.

"Lay off of me, bo."

I hit him again.

"Awright, awright. Only stop. Shardock went to Washington yesterday. Big meeting. I was supposed to go up there. Leggo of me, willya?"

He sat up groggily.

"Where in Washington?"

"The Hotel Statler, bo. He's getting together all his big shots. Jeez, bo. Did you hafta? I don't feel so good."

At first I thought it was the beating, but then it was like looking at Stanley Fuller all over again. Gnarled, ancient hands. Bulging eyes. Veins like rope. Clothing too big. Sammy wasn't going to live to be a killion.

He was trying to say something, but he flopped over on his side, his skinny pipe-cleaner arms dangling from his short-sleeved shirt, twitching. A withered old man, dying of old age. He was still trying to talk, his dry, thin lips opening and closing in slow motion, spittle drooling out at the corners, when he died.

Nina was crying, but I shook her roughly until she stopped. "Look," I said, "can't you understand? We know where Shardock is. We can find Shardock. And there's something else. What happened to Sammy. He took

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too much etergen and died. Instead of needing a booster in three days, he needed it in a matter of minutes. If we can get Shardock to take an overdose, so he'll need the antidote himself . . ."

But we were wasting time. I went through Sammy's pockets and found the keys to his Merc. We went outside and before I kicked the car over I opened the glove compartment on a hunch and found a .38 Banker's Special and a clip of ammo. I loaded the gun and tucked it in my belt under my jacket. It was a little after six o'clock when we pulled away from the clapboard farmhouse.

Less than five hours.

From Richmond to Washington is about a hundred miles, four lane superhighway all the way and nothing to slow you down except a few minutes of heavy traffic in Fredericksburg, a small city in which Barbara Somebody had once held out a Union Jack in defiance of the Confederate Army.

I was congratulating myself at the way we were eating up the miles when something exploded and the car lurched toward the shoulder of the road, trying to buck from my hands. Blowout.

We eased to a stop. I cursed, jumped out with the keys clutched in my hand, opened the trunk for the spare and the jack.

There weren't any.

I stood there, staring at the open trunk. My watch was ticking. Nina had come out to see what was the matter. We were still some ten miles south of Fredericksburg, fifty-odd miles south of the nation's capital—and Shardock. Except for two phials of clear liquid and an empty hypodermic needle, the trunk was empty. Etergen? It had to be. But we had utterly no idea regarding the dose and might wind up killing ourselves as Sammy had, or, if we were too careful, not using enough. Etergen wasn't the answer, but I scooped up the phials and the hypodermic and shoved them in my pocket.

"What's the matter?" Nina demanded.

"Damned fool had no spare tire. We hitch."

We stood behind the car and waved our thumbs and watched the northbound traffic streak by. We stood there and I was sweating although it was still cool this early in the morning. I swore to myself in the future, if there was a future, I would give

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any hitch-hiker who held out his thumb a lift, any hitch-hiker at all, even if he had two heads and four arms with a sub-machine gun tucked under each one.

And the cars roared by.

At seven twenty-five a Ford pickup, battered and rattling, slowed down and stopped for us.

"Going to D.C.?" I said. My voice rasped painfully in my throat.

"Hop in, folks."

We climbed in the cab and stared straight ahead as the driver geared into high and offered cigarettes around before he lit one for himself. I watched the speedometer needle hover around thirty and could see our lives ticking away on the dashboard clock.

"Got a hundred and thirty thousand miles on this heap, folks. Never any trouble at all. Y'know why?"

"Why?"

"Never take it up over forty. Bad for the motor, yes sir, don't let them advertisements tell you otherwise. Had a governor installed, you bet. Can't go over forty if I wanted to. Hope you folks are in no hurry."

"As a matter of fact, we are."

"What fer? Look at me. Sixty-three this past week. Always take it easy. Like I got a governor on myself, too. Probably live to be a hundred. Don't rush, folks. Just wear yourself out, I always say."

We could get out and try our luck again. And maybe not get another hitch at all. We stayed put. I watched the speedometer needle climb to thirty-five while other cars flashed by as if we were standing still. I wanted to throttle the old man but could do nothing but sit there and listen to him talk while the minutes fled and we crawled.

We reached downtown Washington at nine twenty and took a taxi to the Hotel Statler. Nina was very pale and her hand which I held kept clutching and unclutching nervously. We weren't talking.

An hour and forty minutes.

"Everything all right, sir?" the driver asked as we got snarled in traffic. He must have spotted our faces in the rear view mirror. For a moment I got alarmed and thought maybe it was beginning early, what had happened to Stanley Fuller and Sammy. But I looked at Nina and she was all right, only drawn and goggle-eyed and

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twitching. We must have looked like hell, both of us. "Fine," I said. "Just fine. Could you try to hurry, please?" I'd never realized before I had such a small voice.

"It's the traffic, sir."

We crawled.

At nine thirty five the driver leaned back and opened the door for us in front of the Washington Statler. I tossed a bill over the back of his seat without looking at the denomination.

"Excuse me," I said to the one free clerk at the desk inside.

"I'm sorry, sir. This lady is first."

This lady was wondering about her Uncle Harvey. Uncle Harvey lived in Chester, Delaware, and was going to spend a weekend in Washington some time in the fall. When it's not too crowded, you know. Would you believe it, he's never been to Washington before. Imagine that. Fifty eight years old. Should he take a single or a double with some other tourist? Would he like the service at the Statler? We'll send him a brochure, madam. Don't mention it. This lady finally moved off to study the people sitting around the lobby to see if they were right for Uncle Harvey.

"Yes, sir?"

"Mr. Shardock? Registered here?"

"A moment." He flipped his directory file. "We have no Shardock, sir."

"You must. You've got to!"

"I'm sorry, sir. There's no Shardock here."

"Please. You spell it s-h-a-r-d-o-c-k."

"Sorry."

A convention," I gasped. "Some kind of convention?"

"We always have conventions at the Statler. The nation's meeting place, you know. Just what kind of convention did you have in mind?"

"A lot of important people. Congressmen. Big business. You know."

"Oh." The owl eyes smiled at us, smiled like a benediction. "Now I remember. We have no Shardock registered at the hotel, but Senator Lawlor is giving a party in honor of a man named Shardock. Let me see now, here we are." He was consulting another directory. "It began at nine thirty in the Grand Ballroom."

We were already heading away from the desk. A clock across the lobby chimed ten times.

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"You can't go in there without an invitation." He was a big hotel flunky in uniform.

"Here," I told him. I pulled a slip of paper from my pocket. He scowled down at it and I swung from the knees and broke a couple of knuckles against his jaw. Still scowling, he fell. A lady screamed someplace behind us, but we pushed in through the French doors.

They were sitting at tables, hundreds of them, in expensive clothing. You could tell it was important. Up on the speaker's rostrum a man was talking into a microphone. He looked familiar, and then I remembered. A member of the House Appropriations Committee. And next to him was the President of Universal Motors. Close by, a two star general. The large ballroom was very bright. Most of the faces I could see were vaguely familiar. These were Shardock's people. Etergen people, in important places. So many of them, it was frightening.

". . . who needs no further introduction to you. I take great pleasure in presenting to you Mr. Gregory Shardock."

Hands struck hands. The applause was deafening. Marionettes whose strings had been pulled. They applauded. They had to applaud.

Shardock got up from a table down front. I hadn't seen him before, but now I could see that Karen had been sitting at the table with him. She smiled. She blew him a kiss. I held Nina's hand and walked toward the rostrum.

"Call us a social club," Shardock said into the microphone. Everyone laughed. "They'll call us a lot of things, but in the end . . ."

I wasn't listening any more. There was a commotion in the back of the room. The guard had regained consciousness and come after us. I sat down at the table with Karen and pulled Nina down alongside me. I leaned my head on my elbow and hid my face. I whispered, "Smile, Karen. Talk. Say anything you want, but don't yell. I have a gun under the table and it's pointing at you."

"Phil, you can't . . ."

"I can and I will. Talk."

So Karen moved her lips and mumbled. My heart was pounding in my throat so hard I couldn't pay attention to what Shardock was saying. Something about his people. In important places. Not just now, not just next year. How he'd taken them and

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given them new identities and made them amount to something. I could hear the guard shuffling by, looking. Soon they'd know I didn't belong, but not yet.

It was ten seventeen.

". . . other governments have fallen because their leaders were mortal, were limited, could expect twenty-odd years of productivity and then old age. If we are successful, if we get the power which . . ."

I stood up. I sucked in a long breath and walked toward the rostrum. Nina followed me, then came up beside me. We climbed the three steps from the side. Someone tried to stop us, but only half-heartedly. "This is part of the program!" I hissed at him, and kept walking.

Suddenly, Nina tugged at my arm and screamed. Shardock stopped talking into the microphone.

I whirled in time to see Karen standing there, lovely in an off-the-shoulder gown. She held a small pistol in her hand. Everything at once, I saw the pistol kick, heard the loud report, felt something thud and burn against my shoulder. I sat down on the rostrum and held the .38 in both hands, pointing it at Karen. She was getting ready to squeeze off another shot, but Nina was trying to dart between us.

I fired carefully and shot Karen between the eyes.

People were shouting. Shardock stood at the microphone, yelling for order. I climbed to my feet, weak and dizzy, watching the blood ooze from my shoulder. I made it to Shardock and snapped the microphone to "off." I said, "Get moving." There was a back door behind the rostrum. Shardock looked at me and at my .38, and headed for the door. There was an explosion, a pistol shot. Someone had retrieved Karen's gun and fired it. Nina and I ducked through the doorway after Shardock.

It was ten thirty three.

We stood in a small room, an antechamber behind the rostrum, where speakers could make last minute preparations. A rack of phials like the two in my pocket lined one wall.

"You're Karen's husband, aren't you?" Shardock demanded. His face had not lost its composure.

"Is all that stuff etergen?"

"Yes."

"The antidote?"

"What antidote, Meadows?"

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"Damn you." I waved the .38 in his face. I pulled back the hammer.

"Don't bluff me. You think there's an antidote. You need it. You won't shoot me."

People were pounding on the door, which I had locked.

"Roll up your sleeve," I said.

Shardock looked at me, and complied. I took one of the phials from my pocket and poured its contents into the top of the hypodermic, then screwed the cap in place.

"You're crazy. Don't do that. One drop of etergen to five cc's of water is the correct dose. Too much is lethal."

I gave the .38 to Nina. "If he moves, kill him."

I pierced Shardock's skin with the needle and pushed the plunger, watching the pale fluid course into his arm. He pulled away from me as if he'd been bitten by a rattler. I took the gun from Nina and watched Shardock head frantically for the phials lined up against the wall. He selected one containing a fluid darker than the others.

"The antidote," he admitted. "For emergencies."

"We'll all use it, Shardock. Then we'll call the police and give them as much time as they need to figure all this out."

"Of course," he said. "Here in this room is etergen. All the etergen in the world. I can never lose power if I carry it around with me, and they all know it takes months to manufacture more. Too many months to do them any good." He transferred the contents of the darker phial to the hypodermic. He reached out and I thought he was going to roll up my sleeve. Instead, he balled his fist and pounded it against my shoulder, where Karen's bullet still lodged.

I screamed and dropped the gun. Nina was yelling too. The door was shaking with blows from the outside. I tumbled after the gun and Shardock went down with me, still holding the hypodermic gingerly.

Dimly, I was aware of Nina smashing all the phials of etergen, the glass shattering, the racks falling to the floor. She was stamping them underfoot. The pale liquid spread on the floor like water.

Shardock got the gun, but I had wrenched the hypodermic from his hands. He sat there on the floor and laughed and squeezed the trigger. The gun missfired. Once, but it was enough.

I kicked Shardock in the

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face and stood up. I grabbed Nina and headed for the rear door of the ante-chamber. A slug plowed into the wall ahead of us, and then we were running, with Shardock close behind, hiding the gun now because there were people in the hall and he thought they might stop him and then he'd never get his antidote.

We reached the garage entrance of the hotel. A sleek limousine was idling there, the uniformed chauffeur standing near the front door. I bowled him over and didn't listen to him yell. Nina piled in alongside me and I gunned the motor. We raced down 16th Street, swerving through the traffic, running red lights, scattering pedestrians.

It was ten fifty.

"There's no more etergen," Nina cried. "I'm not sure why . . . why I did it."

"You had to. They'd all done too much for Shardock. They couldn't start over. They'll grow suddenly old and die and the country will have to pick up the pieces without them."

Nina managed to plunge the needle into my arm while we drove, then used it on herself. I thought I was going to pass out but couldn't stop now and let Nina drive. There wasn't time.

Shardock was following us in another car, rocketing through the red lights after us. Racing against time as we had raced. A bullet shattered the back window of our car. There was a coupe in front of us, a police car. I tried to slam on the breaks and heard the rending sound of metal against metal.

Nina staggered out the door and into the arms of a policeman.

Shardock's car had stopped behind us. Shardock was behind the wheel, but not moving. I half crawled, half walked to him. I pulled myself up by the door handle and looked inside. Shardock was a little old man, withered and parched of skin, with veins like rope.

Shardock was dead.

"I've called for an ambulance," the policeman said.

I was wondering what the Grand Jury would think, and then not caring. With enough important people dying suddenly of premature senility in the next three months, I thought we could prove our point.

Then I was wondering if they married people in hospitals.

It was exactly eleven o'clock.

THE END

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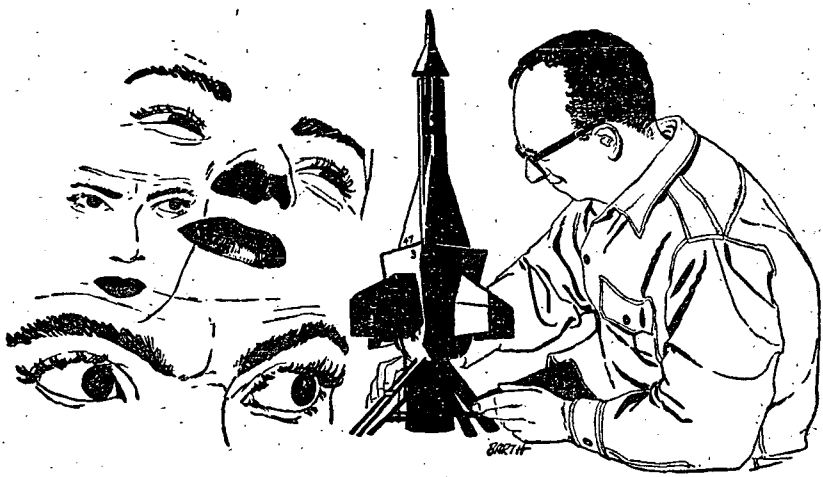

for little george

BY J. B. DREXEL

He dreamed of Space; she wanted mink. Both won—the hard way....

CLICK! went the station-dial on John Allen's teleset.

He looked up, startled. His wife, Helene, had changed the station. Symphony Hall in Boston had vanished, and with it the soft strains of the second movement of Santessen's Fourth; instead, the screen was filled with the bustle and glitter of the Friday Night Television Shopping Center, broadcast from downtown L. A.

"I was enjoying the symphony," John Allen said, just for the record. It wouldn't do any good, of course.

"Tonight is Sale Night," was the reply.

John Allen sighed. "It's just that Klemens Berg was conducting. I've been waiting for two weeks to hear that broadcast. But, of course, if it's Sale night . . ."

"You know I hate symphony music, anyway. I have to listen to it all week. I guess I have a right to shop on Friday—"

"Sure you do," he said wearily. "Every right in the world. But I'm surprised that you can hear the music, or anything else, during the week, the way you keep after

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me to turn it off—or else so low I have to crawl right into the set to hear—"

"*Will* you be quiet?"

She had turned up the volume to be sure to hear the saleswomen clearly. The store noises were a rude shock, after Santessen's soft woodwinds. One saleswoman was holding up a kitchen-mixer:

"—faster and easier than any other mixer," she was saying. "And no mess! Nothing to scrub! Just throw away the disposable bowl when you're through. The price is usually fourteen credits, ninety-eight, but — she smiled warmly — "tonight only, on the Friday Night Television Shopping Center, we're offering it at the special low price of only nine credits, ninety-eight—"

After a little more sales-talk, the purchase-number of the mixer flashed onto the screen—X-1548-D, bright red against a green background.

Helene's hand poised indecisively over the Telemeter keyboard. She tapped out X-154 . . . and then pressed the Clear button. "Overpriced even at ten credits," she sniffed.

The saleswoman moved aside, and another took her place. She demonstrated a *Jules of France* shampoo-and-permanent cap on a dummy head.

"Now that's something I can use," Helene said. When the purchase-number appeared, she tapped it on the keyboard.

Next was a General Radar Appliances vacuum-cleaner, which would do floors and light dusting unattended. Then a rotisserie. Then an auxiliary television screen—two feet square, half an inch thick, designed to be hooked up to your regular set and put anywhere else in the house. The price was twenty credits.

Helene bought it. Just as she punched its combination, the shampoo-and-permanent cap arrived, neatly wrapped in sprayed plastic, in the delivery chute.

"Do you really think we need another screen?" Allen said, thinking of those twenty credits. "We have three already."

"I want one in the dinette," Helene said, without taking her eyes off the teleset.

"Couldn't we move one of the others into the dinette, then? After all, twenty credits is a lot—"

"If the Harrimans can have four of them, I guess we can!"

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"Ray Harriman makes twice what I do, Helene—"

"Oh, I know *that,* all right," she said nastily. "We can afford it, though. Be quiet, will you?"

Sure, we can afford it, he thought. *There goes my new suit.*

Helene was looking at the teleset, disturbed. "John," she said.

"What?"

"The light is flashing."

He looked at the little red light at the left of the Telemeter keyboard. It was blinking, which meant that the purchase Helene had just indicated wasn't getting through intelligibly to the Shopping Center.

"The keyboard must be out of order," he said. "I'll get a man to fix it tomorrow."

"But I want that screen."

"Let it go, dear—we don't need it."

"I *want* it, John."

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" he said. "I don't know how to fix the keyboard. Use the phone."

"They don't take phone calls."

"Forget about it, then."

"It's a bargain," she complained. "We paid twenty-two credits for the last one." She thought for a moment, her eyes speculative. "Go next door to the Connor's, John. Order it on *their* teleset."

"Oh, now, Helene," he objected. "It's raining out . . . besides, we hardly know the Connors."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt us any to get to know them better. Everett Connor is *somebody* in politics. You just never think how important it is to know people like that!"

"Good Lord, dear, he's only an attorney who once ran for—"

"Go *on,* John." She looked at the teleset petulantly. "Damn it—I won't be able to shop any more tonight. *Look* at the beautiful handbag!"

"Let the screen go too, honey. We just don't need it."

Her mouth thinned. "You go over to the Connor's and buy that screen. I've wanted one for the dinette for weeks now, and I don't intend to let that bargain slip by."

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Helene, I don't think you realize—how would you feel if Connor were to come barging in here, almost a perfect stranger . . . I mean, it's a lot of trouble. That's no way to get to know anybody, if that's what you want. He'll get billed for it,

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and we'll have to pay him, and—"

"Are you going to go?" she said, her voice taking on the sharp edge he knew so well. "Or are you just too lazy to get up?"

"Maybe I'm just too lazy to pay for it," he said, with unaccustomed spirit.

"All right," she said in an even, tight voice. "All right. Don't get it. I guess I shouldn't expect you to want to do anything for me. Sit there and sprawl; I wouldn't disturb you for the *world!*"

"Oh, come now, Helene, don't get nasty about it—"

"*Me,* nasty! Well, I like that! After I work hard all day cleaning house and cooking and washing, you can't even budge a precious inch to make things a little pleasanter—"

"I work hard all day at the plant, too, but I still keep my temper."

Helene got up and turned off the teleset angrily. "You're not going?"

"I don't think so, dear." He reached toward the teleset, to turn it back on. "They're probably eating right now, anyway—"

"All *right.* Don't bother saying another word. And don't turn on that awful music again!"

He sighed, and gave up any idea of hearing the Santessen. "If you want another screen so much, I'll buy you one tomorrow."

"Don't trouble yourself. I'll get along fine with *three* screens."

"Frankly, I don't see why you shouldn't be able to."

"I guess you don't! It doesn't matter to you that everyone else on the block has one in every room. I suppose it's perfectly all right for us to look too poor to buy one for the dinette! Why, just the other day at the bridge party Mrs. Kinkaid asked me why we didn't have one in the bathroom—"

"Mrs. Kinkaid—"

"What could I *say?*"

"—is a snooping old harpy."

"Well!"

"The second day we moved in, she cornered me in the bank and tried to pump me about how much I'd deposited."

Helene looked shrewd. "You never told me that. What did you say?"

"I said good day."

Helene let out a hissing breath. "My God! Couldn't you have hinted that you were important? Don't you know how to *talk* to such people? Honestly, sometimes I—"

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"I guess not. I saw no reason to say anything at all."

She glared at him. "You don't have sense enough to want to be *really* accepted by such people, evidently!"

John Allen pushed with one finger at the news-facsimile that lay on the low table beside his chair. The headline was: P E T E R BOYLE TO WED URANIUM HEIRESS. It was the local society sheet. The Allens subscribed. John had to buy his regular news-fac from the machines at the transtubes.

"Sometimes," he said, "I think all you care about is social climbing — appearances—"

"Well, if we had appearances, we'd have *something*."

"I try. I think we're comfortable enough here—"

"Comfortable *enough*," she said harshly. "Stuck in the same job for seven years . . . assistant - assistant chief chemist in a food plant! If only I'd listened to my father! If only I'd known when I married you that you were never going to get anyplace or be anything!"

He stood up. "It's all coming out tonight, isn't it?" He looked at her, eyes dark. "It isn't really the screen. It's everything."

She looked at him contemptuously.

"It's everything all added up, and this is the sum: nothing." After a moment he sighed. "You shouldn't have turned off—that symphony broadcast."

"What do you mean?"

"It was shocking." His eyes were on the model spaceship that sat gracefully on its fins on the mantle—a replica of one of the big freighters that plied their way through the silent, star-clouded reaches from Mars to Earth, Venus to Callisto—all the places that a food chemist might dream of seeing, but never would. Often John Allen had sat in his chair and looked at the model, and the cream-colored wall behind it had darkened to a canopy of black and silver, and blue flames had licked from its steering tubes as it prepared to land on some far and romantic world.

He left the moon and returned shortly wearing his raincoat and hat.

Helene looked at him with approval. "So you're going after all, eh?" She appeared to relent a little. Relenting from her mood of a moment ago, John Allen thought, softened her expression to one of mere contempt. "I knew you would, dear You

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just need pushing. The purchase-number of the screen is—"

He interrupted her, standing by the door. "I'm glad we never had any children," he said quietly, and left.

Click! went the station-dial on George Wentworth's teleset eleven years later.

Helene Wentworth, thirty pounds heavier, sat down and prepared to do the Friday evening's shopping.

The doorbell rang.

When she opened the door she gasped, and her eyes widened, and she braced one hand on the doorknob. Then her face became hard and hating.

The older, tougher, space-burned man standing under the porchlight said, "Hello, Helene."

She looked at him for a full ten seconds, up and down. Then she nodded once and said in an icy, deliberate voice, "So you went off and became a spaceman, eh? Off to Mars, eh? That's just where you belong, John Allen!"

"That's right," he said cheerfully.

"Well? What do you want?"

"My ship docked yesterday," he said. "Repairs in the L. A. Pits. First time I've been west in years, and I thought I'd look you up. I checked City Hall and found you'd remarried—"

"Oh, you thought you'd look me up! After walking out on me and never coming back and never sending me one unit!"

"You went to your father for money, didn't you?"

"Of course I did," she snapped. "What else could I do?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. But I knew you'd be all right."

She stepped back to slam the door in his face.

"Before you do, Helene," he said, "I had another reason for coming. I came to get something. Then I'll go peacefully." He looked at her placidly. "May I come in? I'll be just a minute."

"You're not going to get anything out of me, John Allen!"

"Can't we talk it over inside?"

After a moment she stood aside, grim-faced. He came in. She closed the door. He went into the living room. She marched after him.

"This is a nice house," he observed.

"I married a *smart* man this time."

"Good for you," he said mildly. "You must have all

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the screens you want, then. Well . . . do you still have that spaceship model—the one we used to have on the mantle? That's what I came to get. That's all I want back, out of everything I left you."

"I still have it." She looked at him narrowly, and her lips in a nasty smile. "So that's what you want, eh? Well, I won't give it to you. I don't see why I should."

"I thought you might feel that way. I'm prepared to pay you for it. It has—a sort of sentimental value for me. I'm sure that—"

"I can imagine," she said. "I saw you looking at it that night. You can't have it. You couldn't buy it from me for a thousand! If that's all you want, I think you'd better leave."

"I'll give you two thousand."

Her smug expression wavered. "Where would *you* get that much money to throw away!"

"Space. It pays off big over the years."

That seemed to irritate her. "Well—I won't sell it! Little George likes to play with it. I think I'll throw it out one of these days, though—God knows, I don't want *him* to grow up with crazy space ideas and leave some good woman—"

"A child? Congratulations, Helene."

"I don't want your congratulations. I wish you'd go now." She glanced over at the teleset. "The Friday Night bargains are on."

He grinned at that. He looked around the room until he spotted the spaceship model, standing on a table near a window. He went over and picked it up, running a hand along a fin. "The *Eroica*," he said. "I worked a year on her. The first year." He hefted it regretfully. "Well, if you won't give it up, that's all right. I don't need it—it's just something I'd sort of like to have."

The front door opened. A large, well-dressed man with a pleasant, tired-looking face came in and looked at John Allen in surprise.

"Hello, dear," he said to Helene, shrugging out of his topcoat. "Who's our guest?"

"It's about time you came home," she said shrilly. "Seven o'clock! Why don't you take the trouble to call when you work late at the office!"

"I tried three times—the line was busy. I can't work miracles, dear." The big man dropped his coat over a chair

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and came across the room. "Perhaps you'd better tell me who our guest is."

"My God, don't you recognize him? Haven't I told you about him often enough!"

The big man's brows went up. He looked at John Allen even more closely, taking in the relaxed body, the space-burned face, the alert eyes, the sturdy, neat spaceman's garb.

"Oh," he said. "I see. No, I'd never have recognized him from your description. Hello, Allen."

"Hello." They shook hands.

"He came to get his precious spaceship model," Helene said.

"Oh?" George Wentworth said again.

She laughed. "I wouldn't give it to him for the world!"

Wentworth looked thoughtfully at the sleek model Allen held. "You want that, eh?"

"I'll gladly pay whatever you—"

"That won't be necessary."

"He can't have it," Helene said sharply. "Not in a thousand years."

"Yes, he can," Wentworth said. "He can have it right now."

"*What?*" Helene looked at him, mouth twisted. "Are you insane? After the way he treated—"

"I'm to tired to argue, dear. Is supper ready?"

"George Wentworth, I won't let you give him anything out of this—"

"It's *his*, dear. Go and fix supper—I don't want to discuss the matter any further."

Helene gasped. "Why — you're actually ordering me around!"

"No, I'm not. It's just that this is one time you're not going to have your way. We're going to give the model to Mr. Allen. It's his, not ours. Is that clear?" He turned to Allen. "It's out of the question to invite you to stay . . . I'm sorry."

"Thanks for the model," Allen said.

Helene said slowly, "Well . . . he *did* offer to pay for it."

Wentworth's eyes flared briefly. He took Allen by the arm. Allen, understanding, walked with him to the door. There Wentworth's eyes found the spaceman's.

"Have you ever been a father, Mr. Allen?"

Allen shook his head.

"I think I know what the model means to you," Wentworth said. "I can always buy another one." He made a small, helpless movement with his hands. "For little George to play with," he said softly.

THE END

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TRILLEY THE SPOILER

BY WINSTON MARKS

The day meek little Mr. Tumble put on a demonstration of his theory, he had the Pentagon brass climbing the walls—until General Beswick's secretary decided she wanted to be kissed!

IT WAS the riding crop which originally attracted Trilley to General Beswick. In her twisted mind she often pictured herself working quietly at a desk in Beswick's anteroom, the door from his private office opening, and without a word of warning, the heavy cut of the quirt lashing deliciously into her unprotected back.

Such a provocative daydream it was, that all the verbal abuse she was able to wring from the brigadier general for whom she was working paled into dull chitchat by comparison. And so she set her sights. Within three weeks the opening occurred in Beswick's office, and Trilley had it.

Only 24 hours passed before the first delightful outburst titivated the blue-eyed stenographer. She was sitting at her desk, as she had dreamed, only the door to Beswick's office was already open. For all his temper and vicious reputation among Pentagon employees, Beswick had an eye for beauty, and she felt his black eyes on her neck like hot-coals.

This, alone, would have thrilled most of the girls Trilley knew, for Beswick was an eligible, bald-headed, virile-appearing bachelor of 42. But simple ogling was not enough to stir Trilley's distorted sex instincts. She plotted quietly how best to drive her new boss to an early peak of infuriated outrage.

With Major Combs, simple misspelling had done the trick. She would never forget

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the night that she dared to louse up three letters in a row, deliberately. It had paid off. When she took the day's correspondence in for his signature she watched the color deepen in his neck. He began cursing her. She moved closer to him. By the time he finished the last letter he was on his feet, screaming with rage and profane abuse that sent the blood coursing through her veins.

Each invective had been a delightful, seductive cut to her masochistic psyche. She giggled softly as she remembered the startled look on the major's face when she melted into his waving arms, quenching his anger and kindling the more appropriate passion in its place.

Yes, Trilley was competent in gaining her way with men. It was clumsy, however, that she must arouse herself only through such inconvenient devices.

Actually, she was a top-notch secretary, and it hurt her pride a little to have to deliberately foul her routine in order to incite anger in her prey. With Colonel Jamison it had been a lengthy campaign of disarranging his personal files and sweating out a crisis in which he finally dashed the drawer open to find something himself. Jamison was cute, but it hadn't lasted. Like the others, he was married and only mildly sadistic. No sooner had Trilley seduced him than he stopped the rough treatment that she loved and started pleading with her to wait for him while he got a divorce. That ruined it, of course.

General Beswick seemed to have deeper possibilities. A long list of predecessors to her job had been fired or quit after only a few weeks, and word was that the leather quirt he kept at hand was actually loaded with lead shot.

The rumor had thrilled Trilley beyond words. None of the other girls had stayed around long enough to report personal experience with the whip, but Trilley was confident she could succeed where others had failed.

Her pulse leaped on this second day of her new job when she heard Beswick scream into his phone and slam it down. He strode through the door, slapping the quirt against his leg and spoke sharply to her.

"Miss Smith, why didn't you inform me that I had a visitor while I was out this morning?"

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"Oh, dear," she said with honest confusion, "I did forget. He was such a mousey little man, and he simply wouldn't give me his name or the purpose of his call—"

"That little mousey man happens to be the worst pest in Washington," Beswick snapped. "It also happens that as a result of letting him get in and out of this office unattended to, I have been handed the assignment of protecting my superiors against him."

Beswick's powerful wrist lashed the air with his black riding crop, and Trilley's eyes widened. It was too much to hope for so early, but she couldn't resist baiting her boss just on the off chance."

"Certainly it won't take a battalion to keep that little man under control, will it?" she asked with a sassy lilt in her voice.

Disappointingly, Beswick dropped his tones. "You don't understand, Miss Smith. This mouse, as you call him, has a highly developed genius for getting into our hair. He pretends to have discovered all the secrets of science—"

"How do you know he hasn't?"

"He's not rational. He says all the secrets of science are within his own body."

Trilley let her eyes travel up and down Beswick's stocky, muscular frame with open insolence, "I would think that your own body might hold some much more interesting secrets," she said tightening red lips across her even, white teeth.

It was a daring approach, using pure insolence and sex combined, but it missed fire. Beswick was too bemused. He grunted at her without understanding. "This crackpot, Tumble, has been in and out of this office twice a week for the past six months trying to wheedle an audience with a four-star general."

"Why a four-star?"

"He refuses to give a demonstration of his so-called tremendous powers except to a four-star general. Claims it's top-secret."

"Well, why don't you get him an interview with the big brass and be done with it?" she demanded sensibly.

"He's nuts, a genuine psycho-ceramic. I've been warned that if he got by my office once more I'd have sole custody of the whole problem. And now he's done it. Dammit, Miss Smith—oh, it's my fault, I suppose. You're new here. I should have left instructions before I went out for coffee."

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"I'm no mind-reader," Trilley told him.

This drew a pinched look to Beswick's eyes, but his gaze inevitably continued down a few inches and became distracted from her remark.

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked with the old familiar wolf-oil smoothing the rasp in his voice.

Trilley shook her head. She was not ordinary wolf-bait. Once a liaison was launched on the wrong note it was hopeless. Before Beswick earned a date with her he would have to prove his knowledge of the proper use of that quirt and demonstrate his capacity to use it.

"Sorry, General," she said coolly. "We hardly know each other—yet."

He shrugged and started for his inner office. The hall door sprang open, and the little mouse-man came through propelled by an M. P. followed by a general officer with bristling gray hair and a long row of stars on his collar.

"Here he is," General Metcher shouted angrily to Beswick. "Now I want you to explain what will happen to him if he even sets foot in the Pentagon again."

Beswick wheeled and purpled. "Yes, sir, I'll tell him, sir. But I'm afraid it will do little good. I've threatened him with everything but a firing squad. What I want to know is how in hell he gets this far with his description posted at every entry, ramp and guard station?"

"That's your worry, now, Beswick," the four-star officer told him. "And if you value your rating—"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, this is all so unnecessary," the *mouse* spoke up in a Peter Lorre voice. "If you'd only let me have a minute's privacy with the general, here—"

Trilley took a better look at the gray-faced little man. Something about his voice cut through his meek appearance and touched a spark in her. Perhaps it was the sheer effrontery and boldness of forcing his way into the sanctum of the top brass that did it, but suddenly Trilley was interested.

She spoke up, "If the problem is so distressing, it does seem you could solve it quite easily by following the man's suggestion," she said.

All eyes turned to her, Beswick's with horrified incredulity that his female, underling nonentity should even give tongue in the presence

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of his holiness, General Metcher—Metcher himself with a rather stupid, open-eyed glare, and the *mouse* with a quick look of alarm.

"Not in her presence, sir," he said pointing at Trilley. "I know how loosely you screen your civilian employees."

Beswick said, "Nonsense, Mr. Tumble. If you have anything interesting to the Army of the United States you sit right down there and start talking. Let General Metcher return to his office and don't you dare molest him again, do you hear?"

Mr. Tumble apparently did not hear. His eyes were still fastened fearfully on Trilley's. "Very well, then, if that's the way it's going to be, *I'll give you a demonstration.* Wait, don't leave, General Metcher!" A sharp note crept into his voice as he issued the command.

Metcher uttered a single word, "Rubbish!" and turned to defy the order. The door slammed in his face. Metcher tugged at the latch, but it wouldn't stir. The M. P. took a try at it, but he had no better luck.

Tumble's voice continued, half whining, half threatening, "I am so tired of this endless running around. All right, so be it. But I warn you, everyone in this room is a marked person. Including yonder blonde female who has a very peculiar look about her."

"What the devil's wrong with this door, Beswick," the four-star general demanded.

"I secured it, General," Mr. Tumble said softly. "I have restrained my many impulses to use my powers to force my information upon you because I am a man of peace. I can hardly hope to convince you that my powers should be used strictly for defense if I use them offensively myself. However, you give me no recourse."

"Beswick, get the floor guard on the phone. Get me out of here!" Metcher howled.

Without awaiting the relayed command, Trilley reached for the phone on her desk. As the receiver came off its cradle a puff of stinking, blue smoke gushed from the cloth-covered wire, dangling to her lap where it touched her lightly clad thigh and burned her.

"Yike! Short circuit," she screamed.

"No," said Tumble. "I did it."

Beswick stepped forward and collared the little, som-

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berly-clad man. "You—you burned that wire in two? Just standing over here?"

"I did. Now, if you will all be seated, I will proceed with my lecture."

General Metcher had finally focussed on the incident and stopped struggling with the door. The acrid smell of burned cloth and rubber insulation puckered his slender nostrils with evidence that he could no longer ignore. He bent a bushey-eye-browed, stared at Tumble. "Exactly *what* did you just do? Repeat it. I dare you!"

"To what purpose?" Tumble sighed. "There are so many other things to tell you and show you."

Metcher walked over to Trilley and removed the phone from her hand. He examined the withered cord, sniffed the rubber stench again and turned back.

"Guard, seize this man and search him!"

The first command was unnecessary, for Mr. Tumble submitted quite readily to the search. When no infernal ray machine was found among the mundane contents of his pockets, Metcher, himself, felt of Tumble's legs and arms through his clothes, in the best police tradition of shaking down a hood.

Then the high brass stepped back, hooked his rump over the edge of Trilley's desk and folded his arms. "I'm a busy man, Mr. Tumble. Start talking."

Beswick and the M. P. ranged over by the desk, too, and Tumble took a position across the room from them automatically placing the group on an audience basis.

"I am a philosopher," he began, and he tossed off the remark with a self-disparaging flip of both hands. But it didn't fool Trilley. She leaned forward and sensed something deep and disturbing in the little man. He was slope-shouldered, dome-skulled and pallid, but his hands had a nervous energy in them that fascinated her. Such hands could wield cunning tortures, such a mind as stared out at her through intense eyes could devise delights of exquisite pain, properly elicited.

"And I have made some basic discoveries that—that could easily destroy our whole race if used unwisely. You see, I have found that man's body encompasses not only an amazing chemical factory, which is medically acknowledged, but it also contains infinite powers of phys-

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ical phenomenon which heretofore have been accomplished *only outside of his body.*"

"Be specific, if you please," Metcher said shortly.

"Well, radio, for instance," Tumble said. "Man has considered himself quite clever to conceive modern electronic circuits, and then to build them with pieces of copper and glass. Gentlemen, all the radios, televisions, radars and such electronic devices are nothing more than monuments to man's incredible stupidity."

Beswick's lip curled cynically. "These back-to-nature crack-pots invariably disparage science as a preamble to their own insane cult-ideas."

Metcher said, "You have a better system for communications, I suppose, Mr. Tumble."

"Not a better one. The same one. Except that I have finally deduced that what man's mind can conceive and construct outside himself, man can accomplish within his own body, thusly."

He raised both hands to the level of his eyes, palms down and fingers outspread to them. Instantly a buzzing entered Trilley's head, a rythmical buzzing, "dit-dit-dit, dah-dah-dah, dit-dit-dit!"

"What do you hear, General?" Tumble requested.

Metcher's arms unfolded and fell to his sides. "Why, I hear—I hear *SOS* in Morse."

"And the others?" Tumble turned his glance to Beswick, the MP and Trilley.

"Crickets," Trilley said.

The MP's mouth was open, and Beswick's forehead creased in an ugly frown.

"Thus you see, I can transmit code on a suitable radio frequency that even an untrained human receiver can detect. With a minimum of training I could show all of you not only how to transmit code, but also how to transmit and receive verbal type communication without any external equipment. Call it telepathy. And then we have other manifestations of electromagnetism."

He moved to a small, steel-cased adding machine on a stand. With outstretched palms over it he levitated the machine into the air where it stuck to his horizontal palms as if welded there.

Metcher looked at the ceiling somewhat startled. "What caused the fluorescents to dim?"

"Well, sir, I was borrowing a little current from the nearest circuit—inductively, of course."

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Metcher's lip compressed in a straight line, and his face went blank. "Yes, of course, inductively. Go on." As he spoke the General moved closer to the MP and his leather-holstered service automatic.

"It is all a matter of insight into the natural vibrations of one's life cells," Tumble explained. "For centuries, man has been thinking up ideas and projecting them in the forms of artifacts outside of him, tools, weapons and ridiculously complicated devices to perform tasks that can be easily accomplished much more directly. And because man has ignored his inner possibilities, he has been limited to the fruits of his manual dexterity, so to speak.

"Take mathematics, for instance. Working within myself, I have been able to translate some of the most abstract formulae into actual phenomena that are literally impossible to attain with your presposterous machines. Like anti-gravity effects. Watch this!"

Without visible effort or even a dimming of the overhead lights, Tumble floated about twenty inches from the floor, stopped, and sank down again.

"Or telekinetics, as I call it." He turned slightly to face Trilley's desk, an expensive, steel affair weighing, with typewriter, at least two or three hundred pounds. Trilley felt it rise beneath her elbows. She jerked back, and the desk rose half way to the ceiling. Tumble returned it gently to the floor with scarcely a bump.

Trilley was unaware how all this was effecting the others. She had a hot little blow-torch scorching her stomach. Here was a man! What power, what brilliance! If she could only—

"You see, gentlemen, the secret I have to offer is not a little one. Perhaps now you can understand why I was so reluctant to reveal it to underlings, even, begging your pardon, of such rank as General Beswick. If my powers should fall into the hands of the wrong people, the enemy overseas, for instance, well, you can imagine.

"All I ask is that you restrict the use of my powers to establishing adequate defenses of the free peoples of the world. When I have such assurances, then I will readily reveal the rather elementary discipline of introspection, or insight, if you will, that

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makes it possible for any rational human to duplicate my feats—and many others."

"There—are others?" Metcher's voice struck Trilley's ears with a strained note of near-hysteria. Now she noticed that the general was trembling, and he shrank closer yet to the rigid MP.

"Oh, yes. Many others. There is the whole field of internal nuclear physics."

Metcher broke. He snatched the black automatic from the MP's holster and leveled it jerkily at Mr. Tumble. "Stand where you are. Don't move. Don't even blink your eyes."

To Trilley's amazement, the other two men were in a similar funk. All three slid around the room to the mysteriously locked door. Metcher cocked the weapon, jammed the muzzle to the latch and pulled the trigger. Even the sound-proofing of the modern office failed to muffle the ear-blasting roar. The door swung in under their clawing fingers.

"Stop, stop Where are you going?" Mr. Tumble's words came faintly over the ringing in Trilley's ears. The three military men stumbled from the room. Outside, Metcher pressed the automatic into the MP's unwilling hand and ordered him to stand guard.

"If he tries to escape shoot him down," the general ordered. "I'll send up some more men right away." Then he and Beswick faded out of sight.

Mr. Tumble stared after them with disbelief and discouragement in his lean face. He turned to Trilley who had remained in her chair. She was trembling but from quite different causes.

"What is the matter with them?" he demanded. "Where have they gone?"

"To summon the dog-catcher, I imagine," Trilley answered from a corner of her crimson mouth. "You just poured it on heavier than they could take."

"I—I don't understand."

"I'll draw you a picture. Right this minute you are public enemy number one, Mr. Tumble. You have secret weapons that could defeat the whole United States Army. Such a thought was naturally unsettling to the big brass you insisted on scaring the pants off of. I recommend that you prepare to defend yourself against some rather rough treatment."

"Defend myself?" The little man allowed a mirth-

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less smile to curve his thin lips. "Do you think I would allow anyone to touch me without my permission?"

Trilley hooked her thumb at the door, through which the sound of clumping footsteps approached. "Here comes the dogfaces, and I doubt that they'll ask permission."

Before Tumble could reply, six MP's in white helmets and armbands pushed into the room and stopped like raring horses. The cause of their reluctance was evident. Mr. Tumble had raised his hands, and from his fingertips two-inch, blue-white sparks jumped out at them, snapping and crackling viciously.

General Metcher's voice sounded from just outside the door. "You'd better surrender and come quietly, Tumble. These men have orders to shoot if you resist them bodily."

All diffidence vanished from the little man now. He backed against the wall opposite the small army, and a look of grim comprehension spread over his face. "I guess it was rather stupid of me to come here," he said in a voice that rose above the hub-bub. "I was foolish enough to think there were wiser heads among the authorities, people who would know what to do with power such as I offer."

"We'll treat you right," Metcher's voice came in nervously. "You must agree we can't just let a man like you run around loose."

Trilley was swiveling her head from left to right. Sweat stood out on her lovely, pale brow, and she licked her lips. Never had such a man existed in all eternity. What luck to even have been in the same room—

"You have no chance to capture me," Tumble said. "I told you that I had mastered nuclear physics—internally. As of this moment I have established an atomic balance in every cell of my body—every gram of iron, oxygen, calcium, carbon and all the rest are set on the verge of fission, all except the hydrogen components. My hydrogen is arranged for a fusion reaction the instant that the other elements enter fission and provide adequate heat. I issue clear warning to you, that I am a walking fission bomb, set within a pound of critical mass. The contact of any other human body to mine will trigger the reaction, and you may write off the Pentagon and a few

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square miles of surrounding area from your inventory."

The blue, electric fire stopped crackling from his fingertips, but his fantastic threat held the men at bay. Beswick's aggressive voice sounded through the door. "That's silly, general. He isn't built of plutonium."

"It's silly to see a desk float off into space, too," Metcher said hollowly. "How in hell do we know he's bluffing?"

"Put a slug into him, and we'll find out." Beswick, apparently, had regained his presence of mind. "Better yet, send downstairs for a Geiger counter."

There was a brief silence, then Metcher agreed, "I think that makes sense. If he's telling the truth he must be radioactive."

While a messenger raced off on the errand, Trilley sat at her desk gloating over the scene. The threat of such violence had her in the grip of an ecstasy such as she had never conceived. A great hunger was welling up in her as she stared at the brave little man defying the minions of the United States of America. What a man! What a lover he would make!

In less than a minute, the guard was back with the Geiger counter. It was passed to the front line of MP's and the sergeant in charge found it in his hand and himself being propelled from behind toward the deadly little man of mystery.

The little box-like instrument had an amplifier and speaker in it, so the clicks were audible. Before the sergeant had proceeded a full pace the counter rattled like a cheap alarm clock with an over-wound spring. Ignorant of the instrument's significance, the soldier began another pace forward, but Metcher screamed him back. "Get out, all of you! Get back. Don't anyone go near that man."

The soldiers retreated with alacrity, and in a moment Metcher and Beswick were once again facing Tumble across the room.

The four-star general was pale and breathing rapidly. "So you are telling the truth, eh? Well, I've got to figure that you like living as well as the rest of us." He held the automatic in his right hand, and in his left was the wildly clucking Geiger counter. "Now what I want you to do is to—" Metcher broke off. "Miss, whatever-your-name-is, what in thunder do you think you are doing?"

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Trilley was on her feet, now. Slowly she was moving toward Mr. Tumble, her blue eyes on his, sliding her feet in a shuffle that was almost somnambulistic. She didn't answer.

"Dammit, get out of here, you—you woman."

Beswick's voice beat at her right ear. "Miss Smith, stop! You're moving into the line of fire. That man is a maniac. He might kill you!"

"Miss Smith! Miss Smith!" Metcher and Beswick chorused together in a rising note of panic.

Trilley now was between Tumble and the gun in Metcher's violently trembling hand. She could almost feel the cold bore of the muzzle glaring deliciously into her spine. Such ecstasy! The thrills traced little rivers up and down her back. The general might even grow desperate enough to shoot—

But he didn't. What officer and gentleman could shoot a lovely woman in the back in cold blood? Besides, how could they possibly know what was in her mind? Yes, had Major General Beswick known that his secretary was a masochist it would have explained several puzzling matters, the one at hand being why she was being drawn hypnotically to the gray little man named Tumble who was now pressing back against the far wall with a look of growing concern.

Tumble spoke out suddenly. "Stop, Miss! I can't disarm myself instantly. It takes minutes. Stop, I say!"

The Geiger counter clicked merrily as Metcher took an undecided step into the room.

Trilley heard it, and she understood the significance. She knew very well that neutrons were blasting through her a billion per second. She knew Tumble was loaded.

She knew that if she kissed those pallid, desirable lips that the whole Pentagon would become a plume of fire and dust reaching into the stratosphere.

So she kissed him.

THE END

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In some respects more is known of the topography of the moon than of the ocean floor, more is known of the movements of certain distant stars than of ocean currents.

—Claude E. Zobell

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the 7th bottle

BY IVAR JORGENSEN

They had a bottle, they said. Empty and old and useless—a hunk of glazed clay that nobody could possibly want. All he had to do was take it out somewhere and lose it. For this little job he would be paid five hundred bucks.

Simple? Sure—only by the time the air had cleared, Sam Kemp knew something he would never forget: when a bottle bites a private eye—brother, that's real news.

THEY were waiting for me when I got down that morning. Two women: a tall number in rustling black, with chill blue eyes set in a face as hard and cold as an ax blade on a winter morning; and a small dumpy woman with soft doughy features, pale damp skin and a fluttery manner.

The tall one gave me a disapproving glare. "Are you Mr. Kemp?"

"That's right," I said.

"I must say you run your office in a very slipshod manner, Mr. Kemp. Do you realize we've been sitting here for almost an hour?"

"It could have been longer," I said. "This is a one-man agency and I usually meet clients by appointment. I'm sorry."

If it softened her any I couldn't see it. "One would expect there would be a secretary."

"Now, Penny," the fluttery one said nervously, and got herself a glare that would have curled armor plate.

I gave them both my Sunday smile and went past them and unlocked the inner office door. "I'll make a note of it," I said. "Come in where I keep my pencil."

The thin one picked up a paper-wrapped package from the couch, gave the furniture and the layers of dust the frigid eye and stalked in, her friend trailing along. They sat down in the customers chairs and the thin number put her package on a corner of the desk and an old-fashioned black handbag next to

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that. I took the swivel chair across from them and emptied the ashtray into the wastebasket and said, "What can I do for you, ladies?"

"My name is Miss Jones," the thin one said. "This is Miss Smith. We wish to engage your services. Provided the price is not too high."

"To do what?"

Her bloodless lips came together. "To dispose of a—of an object."

I blinked at her. "*Dispose* of an object? You mean you want me to get rid of something for you?"

"Exactly, Mr. Kemp. If your fee is within reason."

They looked all right. In an off-key way. In their early fifties, I judged, although their turn - of - the - century clothing, complete lack of makeup and general unattractiveness may have added a few years. Both of them belonged in the pages of a Bronte novel instead of the office of a private investigator on a bright morning in June.

I took out a cigarette and said, "I'd like to hear a little more before we talk price, Miss Jones. It *is* Jones?"

She reared up. "Are you questioning my word? Please put away that cigarette."

I put it away. "The Joneses and the Smiths usually keep apart," I said. "What is it you want disposed of?"

She put a finger gingerly on the parcel. There was no polish on the nail. "This."

"What is it?"

"A . . . bottle," she said. Abruptly she shuddered, as though from a sudden chill, and her already pale skin turned paper white. The other woman caught hold of her arm and said, "Now, Penny," in exactly the same way she had said it before.

Traffic sounds from Chicago's Jackson Boulevard eight floors below came in through the open window behind me. There was the light odor of lavender dusting powder in the air. It wasn't coming from me.

"A bottle," I said carefully. "And you want me to get rid of it. Just kind of throw it away, you mean?"

"The method you use," Miss Jones said, "doesn't matter. Just . . . get rid of it, please."

I picked up the package and hefted it appraisingly. It weighed more than a fifth of bourbon but less than an anvil. I took out the office letter opener and used it to break the cord holding the brown paper in place. The two women watched with a kind of

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weird fascination as I slowly peeled back the heavy paper wrapping.

It was a bottle, all right. Short and squat, with a two-inch neck and the sides pinched in like they are on one of the better brands of Scotch. This one wasn't made of glass, however. It was of some sort of glazed pottery in a shade that, at first glance, looked to be dark gray. But as I turned it in my hands, sunlight through the window brought out a blending of shifting colors which seemed to flow into each other, giving an impression of fluidity and life.

No label on it, no words or symbols pressed into the surface. The stopper was of the same pottery in the same shade of gray. It fitted as tight as a champagne cork. I twisted and tugged at it and finally, almost reluctantly, it came out.

There was the rustle of suddenly released breaths from my clients. Tiny beads of perspiration dotted the forehead of Miss Jones. Seeing their reaction gave me the feeling that I had just finished removing the fuse of a time bomb.

I tilted the neck of the bottle over my ashtray. Nothing came out. "It's empty," I said needlessly.

"I could have told you that," Miss Jones said in a strangled voice.

"But you didn't." I set the bottle on the desk pad and scowled at it, and from it to Miss Jones. "Let's hear the rest of it."

"There's nothing more for you to hear, Mr. Kemp. I want to hire you to dispose of this bottle for me. In any manner you see fit."

"It looks like a nice bottle," I said. "Just the thing for the top shelf of your whatnot stand. Or maybe the fireplace mantel. Why not keep it?"

Her thin nostrils drew in coldly. "That needn't concern you, I think."

"It concerns me, Miss Jones. Believe me. You come in here and ask me to take something off your hands. I never saw either of you before. There's nothing in the world that I know of to prevent you from tossing this bottle into the handiest garbage can. That's the simple way—the way anyone would think of instantly. The way, Miss Jones, you must have thought of yourself. Going to the expense of hiring somebody to do it for you is crazy. One woman with a bottle could be crazy. But not two.

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That's why I say there's more to it than what you've told me. If I'm going to do what you want I'm going to have to know why I'm doing it. Otherwise, take your bottle out of here and find a more trusting soul."

Judging from what I'd seen of her I expected she would get out of the chair, grab her property and her friend, and stalk out, slamming the door for good measure. Instead, she stayed where she was, not moving, her eyes gauging me, trying to see past my expression, her lips no longer lips at all but a thin slash like a razor cut.

"I'll pay you one hundred dollars, Mr. Kemp."

"Two hundred," I said.

". . . Very well. Two hundred." She opened her bag and took out a wallet that had seen better days. She opened that and dug out a roll of bills and counted off four fifties and dropped them on the blotter in front of me.

"Five hundred," I said.

There was a shocked silence. Miss Jones took a deep breath. "I see." The contempt in her voice was there for me to hear. "I suppose I should have expected this from somebody in your grubby profession. Actually I'm rather glad."

I didn't say anything.

Her eyes dropped to the money in her hand. The Smith woman was looking at her wide-eyed, her breath coming in tight little gasps. Miss Jones removed six more of the bills and let them flutter down next to the first four, leaving the original roll thinner than her respect for me. "May I trouble you for a dime, Mr. Kemp?"

I looked at her, dazed. "A dime?"

"If you please."

I took out whatever change I had on me. "No dimes," I said. "How about a quarter?"

"That will do nicely."

I handed it over. She dropped it and the rest of her own money into the wallet and returned it to the bag. She took out a small blank white card and a fountain pen, wrote something on the card and put it down next to the five hundred dollars. The pen disappeared, the bag snapped shut, and Miss Jones stood up with an air of finality. "Good morning, Mr. Kemp. Come along, Opal."

I looked at the card. Words written there in a thin spidery script said:

May 12, 1954. Received of Mr. Samuel Kemp the sum

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of twenty-five cents (25¢), payment in full for The Seventh Bottle.

(Signed) Penelope Jones.

By the time I finished reading it they were at the door. I said, "You forgot something, Miss Jones."

She turned quickly. Her eyes looked at the desktop, at the chairs where she and her friend had been sitting, back to me. "I don't believe I quite understand—"

"Your money," I said.

"My . . . money?"

I pushed the bills over to her side of the desk. "I just wanted to find out how high you'd go. You went too high, Miss Jones. Far too high. Take it back."

"I've engaged your services," she said frostily. "You gave me your price and I paid it. I don't see why we should discuss it further."

"I'll get rid of your bottle for you," I said. "Only now, according to the card you wrote out, it's my bottle. You gave your price and I paid it. So kindly pick up your five hundred dollars."

She hesitated. "You need the money, don't you?" I said.

She looked down at her hands and swallowed. "Yes," she said. Her voice shook a little. "Yes, I need it."

She went on standing there, still haughty, still full of pride. I got out of the swivel chair, picked up the money and went over and stuffed it into her bag. She had turned to stone. I said, "I may want to get in touch with you later on. How would I go about it?"

"That won't be necessary."

"Probably not. But just in case."

"I'm in the phone book."

"So are a few thousand other Joneses. A phone number will do."

Her eyes veiled over, as eyes often do when their owner gets set to pull a fast one. ". . . Edgewater 8-4097."

"One minute," I said. I went back to the desk and dug into the center drawer. It was a full minute before I could find a pencil with a broken point. I used the office knife to sharpen it, found a clean page in my notebook and said, "What was that number again?"

She breathed in and out. "Edgewater 8-4907."

"Well, well," I said. "A moment ago it was 4097."

Sudden color stained her thin cheeks and the point of her chin looked sharper than the one on my pencil. "You have the number, Mr. Kemp. Good day."

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The door closed behind them both. Miss Jones hadn't banged it after all. I found a cigarette and lit it and sat staring at the match flame. "They're crazy," I said aloud. "Both of them. They're as nutty as a pecan orchard."

I hoped it would turn out to be that simple.

II

THE Museum of of Natural History was, and is, a long low sprawling gray stone building filled with dignity and the residue of the ages, located near the lake front below Twelfth Street, surrounded by a great deal of open landscaped ground and with the Planetarium sticking up like an upended egg not far away.

I drove out there shortly before eleven o'clock in the morning. There seemed to be hardly anyone around, and the only sounds were the steady whir of traffic on the distant Drive and the voices of a pair of sparrows fighting over a worm. I parked the Plymouth and walked through the bright sunshine, across a sparkling green lawn, past a pair of revolving sprinklers and on up the wide stone steps to the Museum's main entrance.

The uniformed guard inside seemed to think it was a little early in the day for gathering culture and why didn't I come back later. He was a rugged looking no-longer-young man with a face like a boat fender, but he was pleasant enough. I explained what I wanted and a couple of interdepartmental phone calls were made, and finally a brisk-looking young woman with black hair and subdued eyes showed up.

She led me along a tremendous hall filled with the giant skeletons of things that, according to the girl, had strode the earth a long, long time ago. I said it reminded me of ex-King Farouk's closet and she smiled politely but a little blankly.

We went through a door marked OTIS MORTON, *Assistant Curator,* and on into a fairly large office outfitted like a vice-president's at one of the more progressive banks. I put down my package and shook hands with a small sharp-featured man in a conservatively cut brown suit with a small white flower in his lapel. He got rid of the black-haired girl and put me in a leather chair across a wide walnut desk from him.

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He sat down and gave me an interested look and said, "I'm Otis Morton, Mr. Kemp. Always glad to help out a fellow collector. What is it you have there?"

I unwrapped the bottle and set it on the blotter in front of him. "This is it, Mr. Morton."

He really went to work on the thing. He tapped it with a fingernail and analyzed the sound. He took out the stopper and peered inside. He held it up to the light through the two tall narrow windows at his back and watched the play of colors on the glazed surface. He got out an enlarging glass and went over the sides and bottom like a pawnbroker with a ten-carat diamond.

Finally he dropped his glass back in the desk drawer, put down the bottle and gave me a curious glance. "What would you like to know, Mr. Kemp?"

There was an undercurrent of disappointment in his tone. I said, "Could you tell me something about the bottle? I mean, where it came from, if it has any real value? I had the feeling that it was very old, and possibly very rare."

He leaned back and made a tent of his fingers and looked at me over the tent. "'Old'—yes. Five or six hundred years, perhaps. It is the work of, I would say, an Arabian pottery maker who knew his business. Probably a Yemenite; they were very good at this sort of thing back in those days. I'd say your bottle was on his wheel about the time Hulagu was capturing Baghdad: A.H. 656."

"Great guy—Hulagu," I said. "What about its value? I've got an investment in the thing and nobody likes to lose money."

He unlaced his fingers and leaned forward and picked it up again and rapped it lightly with his knuckles. "I'm afraid it's practically worthless, sir. Unfortunately for your purpose, there are hundreds of such pieces in existence, of all shapes and sizes. While this particular one has evidently been cared for and is in excellent condition, that adds little to its value."

"And I had such hopes. You wouldn't care to keep it, would you? I mean, for the museum?"

He smiled and shook his head. "We try not to clutter up the premises, Mr. Kemp. Take it home to your wife. Makes an interesting flower vase."

"I have asthma," I said, "and no wife. Anyway, it was

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nice of you to give me some of your time. Maybe on my next call I can bring you an Egyptian mummy or a dinosaur bone."

I wrapped the bottle back in the paper I had brought it in, and Otis Morton walked over and opened the door for me. He said, "Mind if I ask where you got the bottle, Mr. Kemp?"

"Why should I mind? It was a gift. From an elderly battle-axe named Jones. Although come to think of it, the word 'gift' isn't quite right. She charged me a quarter for it."

He smiled again but there was nothing of humor in the sudden dart of his small bright eyes. "I see. Well, it's worth at least that."

I said, "The old lady called it the Seventh Bottle. Would that mean anything you can think of?"

He blinked. "*Seventh* bottle? How odd. No, I can't say that it does. Didn't you ask her?"

"I thought of it," I said. "But she would have only told me it was none of my business."

The sunlight seemed even warmer on my back and somebody had moved the revolving sprinklers. I went slowly along the walk to where I had left the Plymouth and tossed the bottle on the seat and slid in behind the wheel. I had wasted some time, that was all it amounted to. A pair of elderly screwballs had looked me up and sold me an antique that was probably worth more than a case of Pepsi-Cola bottles, but not much more, and then gone back to the nursing home. The only thing that was keeping me from heaving the thing into the nearest trashcan was the way those two old women had acted while I was examining it. The sudden pallor, the beads of perspiration, the hitch in their breathing. It had seemed a lot of emotion for one small bit of ancient pottery to bring out.

I lit a cigarette and sat there looking at the scenery, willing to waste a little more time before going back to the office to wait for my next client to ring me up or walk in. It might be to serve a summons or to check up on a straying husband or to find a teen-ager who hadn't come home last night. It wouldn't be someone who would pay five hundred bucks to have me throw away an empty bottle. One of those in a lifetime is three under par.

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There were two other cars parked along the curbing behind me. I could see both of them in my rear-view mirror. One, a '48 Olds sedan, had nobody in it; the other, a sleek-looking gray Buick convertible with the top up, looked as though it had just come off the assembly line. There was a man behind the wheel of the Buick, sitting there slumped down, with a snapbrim hat tilted down over his face. He could have been a vacuum-cleaner salesman or an installment collector catching up on his sleep. It seemed a nice car for sleeping in.

I put out the cigarette and started the motor and drove off. The stone towers of the Loop to the northwest were tall and lovely against the very blue sky. It was a day for going to the ball game, for cutting the lawn, for a book and a park bench. And on the seat next to me was a hunk of pottery nobody wanted.

At Michigan Avenue the light was against me. I drew up next to a Chevrolet driven by a woman with a grim expression and too many bracelets and waited for the signal to turn green. For no reason my eyes went to my mirror. Directly behind me was a gray Buick convertible driven by a man whose snapbrim hat shielded his face.

It didn't have to mean anything. When the light changed, I made a right turn and drove north. At Jackson Boulevard I swung left—and the gray Buick made the same turn. I said, "Small world," under my breath and stayed on Jackson, past the building where I kept my office, and on down to LaSalle Street. There I turned right again, continued on to Randolph Street, along it to Michigan Avenue, north on that until I turned off at Ohio and parked halfway along the block. I switched off the motor and was setting the handbrake when the Buick hove into sight. It rolled slowly past me and drew up at the curb no more than twenty feet away.

It wasn't as clumsy a job of tailing as it sounds, but it was still clumsy. I got out and walked briskly over to the nearest building entrance and on through the revolving door. I made the circle right along with the door and stepped out again and waited, hidden from the walk by the edge of the entranceway.

He worked fast, I'd say that for him. I hadn't taken a third breath before a nar-

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row-chested little man in a brown suit and a snapbrim hat sidled up to the Plymouth. He shot a quick glance at the entranceway, didn't see me, and reached for the door handle. He was picking the wrapped bottle off the seat when my knee hit him in the back.

Only a quick movement of his hands kept his face off the brake pedal. Before he could pick himself out of the cramped quarters down there, I had run my hands over him looking for a weapon. It seemed he wasn't carrying anything more lethal than a fountain pen. I yanked him off the floorboards and pushed him into a sitting position on the seat. I sat down next to him and pulled the door shut and took hold of his arm just above the elbow, letting my fingers bite in. He flinched a little and tried to pull away. He didn't make it.

I said, "Slight mistake, hey?"

He had the look of somebody just off the boat. He had a dark skin, very dark but not Negroid. There was a hawk-like cast to his prominent nose, with heavy black brows meeting above it. His mouth was large and thin-lipped and at the moment it was set in a sullen curve. His close-set, dark brown eyes were filled with a mixture of caution and fury. He said nothing.

"Talk to me," I said. "Tell me about it. I'll believe anything that's not a lie. What were you doing in my car?"

"My arm, *effendi*," he murmured.

I let loose of it and he reached slowly up and massaged the muscles where I had gripped them. His eyes flashed at me. "A mistake," he said, a whine in his voice. "By Allah I swear it. A simple error."

"Not good enough," I said. "Why the tail job?"

He looked blank. "You've been following me," I said. "All the way from the museum. I want to know why."

"The *effendi* is pleased to jest. I know not of what he speaks."

"In about a minute," I said, "the effendi is going to haul you down to Police Headquarters and have you locked up for attempted robbery. Unless you tell me what you're up to."

He shrugged hugely and spread his hands. "A mistake, as I have said. I believed your automobile to be that of a friend. I was but entering it to await his arrival when you sprang upon me. If you wish to bring the incident to the

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attention of the police, that is your affair."

We stared at each other. His expression was as blank as the side of a pyramid. He had made his explanation and nothing short of being staked out on an anthill was going to change it.

I said, "Hold still, buster," and jerked open his suit jacket and took his wallet out of the inner pocket. He glowered at me but that was all he did. In the wallet was some money, quite a lot of it, a few important looking papers and a passport.

It was a passport that had been around. The picture in it was him, all right. The rest of it said his name was Alif Hassoun, that Jidda, Arabia, was his home town, and that he had three months in which to do his sightseeing in the United States.

The writing on the papers was mostly in a foreign language, but there was a rent receipt for a room at the Winlake Hotel, a fleabag on the near North Side. That, and a folded sheet of note paper with the notation "P. P., ED 8-7087," was all that made any sense to me.

I tucked the papers and the passport back in the wallet and handed it to him. I said, "The bottle can be bought. How much will you pay?"

His thick brows climbed his forehead. "The bottle?"

"The bottle." I pointed a thumb at the package on the seat between us. "The one you were about to walk off with when I showed up. Don't go stupid on me, effendi."

He flashed his white teeth and lifted his shoulders. "I know nothing of a bottle. However, I am always interested in bargains. May I see what it is you wish to sell?"

I stripped back the paper. The bottle shimmered in the light through the windshield. Alif Hassoun's eyes narrowed and he put out a finger and touched the neck. "It is the art of my people," he murmured. "What price do you ask for it?"

"Five thousand," I said. "Dollars."

He seemed not to have heard me. He couldn't take his eyes off the thing. Again the finger went out to caress the glazed surface. "It is very beautiful," he said softly, "but it is not unusual. The price, of course, is impossible. One hundred dollars would be much too high."

"Five grand," I said. "Like they say in the movies." I drew the wrappings back into place, with him watching

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me out of a frozen face. "Take it or leave it."

"I will consider it," he said softly, not meeting my eyes. "Not at the amount you have named, naturally. If I should wish to talk further with you—"

I gave him one of my cards. He put it carefully behind the handkerchief in his breast pocket and let me see his teeth again. "I assume that I am free to go?"

"For an Arab, you can sure handle the language."

"I am a University graduate, *effendi*. In Beirut."

"How was their football team?"

That got me another blank look. "On your way," I said and opened the door.

He slipped out and scooted along the walk to the Buick. I watched him make a left turn at the next corner before I started my car.

I stopped off at a drugstore and bought a canvas beach bag. A blue one, priced at a dollar-twenty-nine, plus tax. From there I drove to the Union Station, where the trains come in. Nobody followed me. I put the bottle in the beach bag, checked the bag at the parcel counter, and mailed the claim check to myself, care general delivery, Rogers Park substation. Somehow or other it seemed the thing to do.

I stopped at a sandwich shop and had my lunch. When I walked into my outer office half an hour later, the place was full of trouble.

III

ALL three of them were right out of the Middle East. The two that stood up as I came in were young and slim, with the quiet eyes, the casual manner and the expressionless toughness that Hollywood has made *de rigueur* for the hard boys of all lands.

But the man on the couch was like nothing I had ever come up against before. He was along in years, thin almost to the point of emaciation, bent in the shoulders, and with a dark leathery skin filled with wrinkles. A moth-eaten goatee straggled along his chin like lichen on a rock. He was wearing Bond Street's best, but on him it was skirts and a burnoose and it would never be anything else.

"You are Monsieur Kemp?" he asked. There was nothing weak about his voice. It was polite enough but it had a no-

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nonsense bite that nobody would miss.

"I'm Kemp," I said.

He bowed sitting down. On anyone else it would have been funny. "Let us say my name is Bahader."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bahader. What's on your mind?"

"You have in your possession a rare bottle which, through error, was removed from my country. I have come to recover it."

I looked from him to his boys. They were watching me out of eyes as distant as Ganymede. I looked at the old man again. "What makes it so valuable? I'm told there are hundreds exactly like it."

Some of his wrinkles shifted around. He was frowning. "I find it difficult to be patient in this matter, monsieur Have the goodness to produce the bottle. At once."

Beyond the inner door the telephone began to ring. I said, "Excuse me," and took out my keys and went over to unlock the door. There was a chewed spot in the wood, and on the floor some splinters. I put out a hand and pushed at the door. It swung silently open. The telephone went on ringing.

I could feel my cheeks burning. I turned around. The old man nodded. "As I said, I find it difficult to be patient. Your rooms have been searched. Without success."

"You've got one hell of a nerve," I said. "Just bust in, grab the bottle and walk out. Is that the way it's done in your neck of the woods?"

"Where is the bottle, monsieur?"

"It's not for sale," I said. "Good-bye to you."

Bahader closed his eyes, opened them, said something I didn't understand. Not that he was talking to me. One of the smooth young men took a foreign-looking gun from under the lapel of his coat and glided over to me. His shoe-button eyes gleamed.

"Get away from me," I said between my teeth.

His arm moved. I ducked. Not quick enough. The gun barrel caught me high on the cheek. I felt the skin split. A numbness began to spread across the side of my face. It went on spreading. In the next room the phone stopped ringing.

"The bottle, Monsieur Kemp," the old Arab said.

A wetness slid along my cheek. I put up a finger and touched it, and it was blood. My blood. Rage moved slowly and heavily in me.

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"I don't have the bottle," I said.

The gun slashed at me again. This time I managed to catch it on my arm. It was a small improvement—a very small one. I had all I could take. I swung my right foot as hard as I could and kicked the smooth young man where his legs joined.

Not that I planned it. You don't plan to kick a man when he's holding a gun his eyes say he will use. But he had hit me twice, both times very hard, and maybe I was afraid not to kick him,

He bent forward, gagging, and dropped the gun. I hit him on the side of the face with a roundhouse right. He seemed to melt away and I stooped quickly and reached for his gun. I didn't make it. A knee drove into my spine, straightening me, my arm was caught and twisted up behind me, and the thin blade of a knife pressed lightly against my throat. One more move and I would be bleeding on the linoleum.

The phone began to ring again.

Bahader got off the couch and came over. He appeared saddened by the violence, but not sad enough to weep for me. "I do not want your life, monsieur. I offer it to you in exchange for the bottle."

The pressure of the blade against my throat increased ever so slightly. I started to nod, thought better of it, and mumbled, "Okay."

The old man moved a hand and I was released. I swayed a little and swallowed the dryness in my throat and rubbed my arm where the gun barrel had hit it. The boy I had slugged was climbing painfully to his feet. He limped over and picked up his gun, gave me a poisonous glare and put the gun out of sight under his arm. It wasn't what he wanted to do with it, but he wasn't the one in charge.

"All right," I said. "I'll tell you where the bottle is. But you'll have to understand that you can't pick it up until sometime tomorrow."

"Why is that?"

"It's been checked at a baggage counter and I mailed the check to myself. No mail deliveries until tomorrow. And even you and your brighteyed punks can't get the bottle without the check."

His expression was grave. "Why did you do it that way, Monsieur Kemp?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. Somebody tried to swipe the thing from my

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car. I figured if it was that valuable it belonged it a safe place."

"Who tried to steal it?"

I shrugged. "He got away before I could ask him."

"Describe him."

"Well, I'd say he was from your part of the world. Fairly young, nose like the blade of a tomahawk."

His hot eyes bored six inches into my frontal lobes. "You are telling me the truth, monsieur? It will be bad for you if you are not."

"It's already been bad for me," I said. "You've got the story; like it or fry in it and see if I care."

"At what time did you check the bottle?"

I didn't know what made that important, but it was his question. "Forty minutes ago, I guess. No more than that."

He did some thinking, then nodded. "Very well. At ten o'clock tomorrow morning a representative of mine will meet you here. Accompany him to the place where the bottle is and turn it over to him. Is that understood?"

"It's understood."

"Any attempt on your part to delay matters, such as notifying the police, will result in your death. Is that understood?"

"It's understood," I said. "I'm really very bright."

"Until tomorrow, then. Good afternoon, Monsieur Kemp."

I blinked and the reception room was empty. Or maybe they just seemed to go that fast. There seemed to be a fetid odor in the room, like the smell in an ancient mausoleum. Or maybe I just imagined that, too.

I went over and looked at the lock on the inner door. It still functioned. The splintered section around it wasn't too bad; a little plastic wood and some veneer would fix it up as good as new. Let the building do the job; if they tried to charge me for it I'd spit in their eye. I was very tough today.

I walked into the inner office and looked into the mirror over the corner washstand. The spot where the gun barrel had landed was purple and there was a small tear in the skin. Call it a badge of honor. Call it painful as hell. Call it anything.

The swivel chair was waiting. I stepped over and sat in it and stared at the phone. It stared back at me. I remembered that it had been ringing a few minutes back, but it was nice and silent now.

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Thoughts moved hotly along the wires in my brain. Why did everyone want that goddam bottle? Everyone, that is, except Miss Jones, Miss Smith, and a battered private detective named Kemp. The man at the Museum had been pretty positive about how worthless it was. Had he been lying? It hardly seemed likely considering that I had offered to give it to him and been turned down.

How had Bahader learned that the bottle was in my keeping? For that matter how had Alif Hassoun known it? Only one answer seemed reasonable: Miss Jones had told them. So we're back to her again.

The notebook. I took it out and looked at the top page. ED 8-4907. The number Miss Jones had given me. She hadn't seemed very sure of it at the time. Maybe it was a new number. I dialed it.

Two rings, a receiver went up, a four-year-old voice said, "Hello, Daddy, bring me something." Before I could think of an answer to that one, a woman's voice said pleasantly, "Yes?"

"Edgewater 8-4907?" I said.

"That's right."

"Is there a Miss Jones there?"

"I'm afraid you have the wrong number," the voice said patiently. "This is the Miller residence."

"How about a Miss Smith?"

"Not even a Brown or a Robinson," the voice said, no longer patient and not even very pleasant. "Good-bye."

The connection ended and I couldn't blame her. I hung up and lit a cigarette. So the old battle-axe had lied to me after all. Not that she could go to jail for it, but if I intended gathering information about the Seventh Bottle, it would have to come from another source. Only one left that I knew how to reach. Alif Hassoun. At the Winlake Hotel, or so the receipt in his wallet had said.

Remembering that led to my remembering something else: the phone number in that same wallet. An Edgewater 8 exchange—just like the one Miss Jones had given me—and with it a set of initials. P. P. P for Penny, but not P for Jones.

The number came back to me slowly, digit by digit. ED 8-7087. The telephone company informed me that Edgewater 8-7087. was listed in the name of Miss Penelope Payne, 274 Thorndale Ave-

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nue. I dialed it, and after the twelfth ring without an answer, put back the receiver.

I had the book out and was looking up the number of the Winlake Hotel when the phone rang. It was a woman named Stewart out in the high-rent district on the South Side. She said she had a confidential matter she wanted me to look into for her, and could I be at her apartment at three o'clock that afternoon. No, she'd rather not discuss what it was about over the wire. An attorney named Ingram had recommended me as being trustworthy and intelligent. I said I'd be there at three and she thanked me.

Before leaving the office, I copied Penelope Payne's address on a sheet of paper along with that of the Winlake and put it in my wallet. The Case of the Seventh Bottle would have to wait until I found out what the Stewart woman wanted. She would pay for services rendered, and so far all I had gotten out of the other one was a busted cheek and a twenty-five-cent deficit.

It turned out that Mrs. Stewart's husband, the head of a Loop accounting firm, had been missing for two days and she didn't want to go to the police about it. I did a little snooping in the right places and turned up an address in Michigan City that might be productive, and drove out there. Mr. Stewart was there, all right, dead drunk and in bed with a blonde who looked as hard as a jail-house door. I snaked him out of the place, sobered him up a little and took him home. His wife accepted the old amnesia gag—in front of me, anyway—paid me a day's wages and expenses, and by nine o'clock that evening I was having my dinner at the Red Star Inn on North Clark Street.

Over coffee I got out the paper with the two addresses on it. 274 Thorndale would be well up on Chicago's North Side, just off the lake. On my way there I could stop off at the Winlake and have a quiet talk with Alif. He might not feel like talking at first, but after what Bahader's boy had put me through, I was going to be hard to discourage.

IV

THE Winlake was a narrow four floors with a gray stone front and a battered-

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looking green canopy on North Dearborn Street, just above Division. The lobby wasn't much larger than a packing crate and about as attractive. The clerk was a slim-waisted number with dark wavy hair, a limp wrist and a petulant manner. According to him Mr. Hassoun occupied 402 and at the moment was in. I said never mind ringing him; I was expected and would go right up.

The elevator smelled of Sen-Sen, the fourth-floor hallway smelled of depravities. 402 was a tall narrow doorway as far from the elevator as you could get. I knocked on it, feet moved on the other side, the knob turned, and Alif Hassoun peered out at me.

His eyes goggled a little. "Mr.—Kemp! This is a surprise."

"Isn't it," I said. "Thought we'd have a small spot of conversation."

"Ah—yes. Of course." He didn't look too happy about it, but he stepped back to let me in. The room was small and about what you'd expect for the kind of hotel it belonged to. A couple of tan suitcases stood in one corner, there was a crumpled newspaper on the so-called lounge chair, and the green bedspread had been lain on. The one window was open and the shade up, giving a breathtaking view of the rear entrance to a public garage.

I moved the newspaper and sat down and got out the cigarettes. He refused one politely and sat on the corner of the bed and watched me light up. He smiled uncertainly. "If it's about the bottle, Mr. Kemp, I'm afraid the price is beyond my rather limited means."

"I might come down some. What would you suggest?"

"A hundred dollars would be handsome, I think. The bottle isn't really valuable, you know."

"Then why pay a hundred for it?"

He moved a shoulder. "Sentiment, perhaps. It comes from my country, *effendi*, and is worth that much to me to return it there."

"Nuts."

His brown eyes got very wide. "I beg your—"

" 'Nuts' is what I said and 'nuts' is what I meant." I pointed to the strip of plaster on my cheek. "I was slugged because of that bottle, mister. Only a piece of luck kept me from losing it then and there. I want to know why all this sweat over a hunk of glazed

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clay everybody says is worthless. I want to know it now, and you're the boy who's going to tell me."

"But I give you my solemn assurance that—"

"Stick your solemn assurance. That bottle was turned over to me this morning by a Miss Penelope Payne. Miss Payne's phone number is in your wallet right now; at least it was when I frisked you this morning. I want the truth out of you. The whole truth, or I'm hauling you down to the nearest precinct house to let the boys get it out of you the hard way. Make your mind up which it's to be."

His dark skin seemed three shades lighter. "Sir, I am a guest in your country. You would not dare."

I stood up. "Get your coat."

He moistened his lips. "By what authority—"

I took out the deputy-sheriff's star I carried to impress people who were easy to impress, and flashed it at him. "Will that do, or shall I send for the wagon?"

I had gone as far as I could go. If he still refused to talk, I would be left with a choice between slapping the story out of him or walking out with empty hands.

He wilted. Most foreigners do when you wave the law under their noses. "What is it I shall tell you, *effendi?*"

I sat down again. "What's behind this bottle business?"

"I have been sent to regain its possession. By Radi Hassoun, the brother of my father."

"Tell it from the beginning," I said.

He put his elbows on his knees and sat staring at the floor. "Know, then, that a fortnight ago the bottle was in my uncle's curio shop in Dimishq, which you call Damascus. One afternoon, during the absence of my uncle, two American women entered the shop in search of souvenirs. I attended them. They looked at everything, *effendi,* but nothing seemed to please them. In my search for other objects to interest them, I chanced upon seven bottles hidden in the rear room of the shop. These I showed to the women. Six were imperfect, but the seventh was truly a flower of the potter's art."

"The Seventh Bottle," I said.

Hassoun nodded sadly. "This bottle I sold to them at what I thought to be a handsome profit. But upon the return of my uncle three days

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later, he noticed its absence immediately and flew into a violent rage. I told him the circumstances, whereupon he explained that the bottle was of immense value and must be found and returned to him. To my questions regarding its importance he turned a deaf ear.

"The American legation informed him that the ladies had returned to America, but was able to furnish their names and their place of residence. Radi Hassoun made arrangements for me to go to America and regain the bottle at any cost. I recall that he smiled saying this, adding that by the time I arrived, the two women would be happy indeed to restore it to its rightful owner.

"Meaning what?" I asked.

Alif Hassoun shook his head. "He would not say. As it was, I left Damascus, arriving this morning in Chicago. As it was still quite early, I decided against telephoning the Misses Payne, but instead engaged an automobile and drove to their home. I arrived just in time to see them enter a taxicab and drive off. The slender lady of the two was carrying a parcel of the exact size and shape of the bottle I had come to get.

"I followed them, *effendi.* When they dismissed the cab and entered a building, I was close behind. I witnessed that they entered your office, and when they left without the package, I waited for you to also emerge. I was near to you from that moment on, until you surprised me as I was about to remove the bottle from your own automobile."

He stopped there and raised his eyes to mine. "And that's all you know?"

"That is all I know, *effendi.*"

"What were you going to do? Just give up, now that I had the thing?"

"I cabled my uncle, telling him what had happened and how much you wanted for the bottle. I have not as yet received a reply."

I got rid of the stub of my cigarette. "Who is Bahader?" I said suddenly.

He wrinkled his forehead, puzzled. "Bahader? It is a common name in my country, *effendi.*"

"Nothing common about this bird," I said, and described the old Arab at length. By the time I got as far as the goatee, Alif Hassoun's expression looked as though it had tangled with a locomotive. "Bahader of

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Sana!" he muttered. "Allah be merciful!"

"That bad, hey?"

"He is very evil, *effendi.* Perhaps the most evil and feared man in all Arabia. I have heard of him many times. It is said by the superstitious that he is directly descended from a Marid of ancient days. Why have you spoken of him, Mr. Kemp?"

"It seems," I said, "he is after the bottle, too."

He wrung his hands almost theatrically. "Then indeed all is lost! None can prevail against Bahader of Sana."

"One can try," I said. I stood up and swung my hat lightly against my leg. "Stop by at my office tomorrow. Say around two o'clock. I may have news for you."

He nodded spiritlessly. "As you wish."

I tipped a hand at him and walked out, leaving him sitting on the bed, his shoulders sagging, his face a mask of dejection. Not because of me. Bahader of Sana had done that to him.

It was shortly after ten o'clock when I turned off Sheridan Road at Thorndale Avenue. No moon and a heavy growth of trees along the parkways made seeing anything hard to do. I parked the Plymouth in front of 274 and got out. The house looked old and gingerbready, set back from the street behind a low white picket fence. Through one of the windows a light burned dimly, as from an inner room. A night breeze rustled the leaves over my head. There was the sound of a muted radio from down the street. The damp smell of the lake hung in the quiet air.

Only the light inside the house kept me from turning around and going back to my car and driving off. Instead, I went along a curving walk between two giant cottonwoods and up four wooden steps to a wide porch. There was enough light to make out the ghostly outlines of a wooden rocker and a porch swing on chains. I crossed to the door and picked up my hand to knock, then put it slowly down again.

The door was open.

That wasn't right. Not at this hour, in a house where two old ladies lived. The door should be closed and the chain in place.

There was an old-fashioned wind-up bell set in the center of the door. I gave the butterfly handle a full twist. It sounded like somebody had thrown a garbage can off the roof.

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No lights went on, no hurrying footsteps, no querulous voice demanding identification. Just the echoes of the bell dying away, and then a silence far, far heavier than before.

I pushed open the door and stepped into the blackness of a small foyer. I said, "Miss Payne?" loudly.

No answer. I tried again, even louder. Nothing came back to me.

The light I had noticed from outside the house was a faint luminosity at the opposite end of the foyer. I walked slowly toward it, into a parlor crowded with the overstuffed junk of a forgotten era. The light was stronger now, coming from an open doorway almost directly across from me.

"Miss Payne?" I said.

The sound of a movement, very faint, and a small snuffling whine like a dog on a tangled chain. I stepped over to the open door and looked in.

She was on the floor in there, next to an overturned wicker chair, her eyes fixed blindly on a far corner of the ceiling. Her chin was tilted far back to show a long gash across her throat, and under her graying head a great spread of blood had soaked into the rug. She was dead. She had been dead for hours.

The dumpy woman was on her knees beside the body. She looked like a tank-town Ophelia, with her hair across her face and her eyes completely mad. From between her slack jaws spilled a low-key whimper that yanked at my nerves like sandpaper against glass.

I said nothing. There was nothing to say. For my money they were both dead. I turned around and walked back the way I had come, my legs as stiff as sticks, the sound of that insane whimper still in my ears.

I called the police from the Thorndale El Station. All I gave them was the address. I hung up before the desk sergeant could ask who was calling. They never did find out.

V

I HAD two rooms and a postage-stamp kitchenette that year, on the second floor of a small walkup on Morse Avenue a block west of Ashland. Nothing fancy, but the furniture was my own and the rent was paid. A colored

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girl who loved Verdi and hated Stephen Foster came in twice a week to change the sheets and empty the ash-trays.

By eleven-thirty I was out of the shower and beginning to feel human again. I opened a window, turned the radio on low to drown out the memory of a mad woman's grief, put together a mild highball, and sat down on the couch to leaf through the morning edition of the *Tribune*.

The smell began while I was reading the editorial page. I sniffed subconsciously at it a time or two before it became strong enough to really hit me. I looked up . . . and the Seventh Bottle was standing on the coffee table directly in front of me.

I said, "Hey!" and dropped the paper. The radio said, ". . . makes your cakes as light as a summer's breeze." It was a hell of a time to bring that up.

The bottle went on standing there, squat and solid, its pinched sides glowing faintly in the lamp light. I bent forward and put a finger against its neck. Solid was the word. The smell was coming from it, all right, although the stopper seemed firmly in place. It was a smell to curl your insteps, to make you hate your nose. It was the smell of the charnel house, the Buchenwald ovens, the open grave.

Only it couldn't be on my table. It had to be on one of the shelves at the Union Station checkroom. I had left it there twelve hours before.

I got stiffly off the sofa, picked up the bottle and went into the kitchen. Holding my breath, I worked the stopper loose and upended the neck over the sink. Blood poured out in a viscous stream, splattering against the white porcelain, while the stink grew heavy enough to walk on. With my free hand I opened the hot-water faucet until it was running at full force. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the redness faded and disappeared down the drain. When the bottle was empty and the last trace of blood gone, I shut off the water and stood there, feeling my stomach grow slowly quiet and the waves of revulsion gradually recede.

I lifted the bottle, then, and brought it down against the edge of the sink as hard as I could. It was like a gun going off. Shards of glazed clay banged against the fixtures and walls and filled the air. After they had settled I gathered them up and filled

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the wastecan under the sink. The floor had to be swept to get the last of it. I swept the floor. If I had had a mop I would have mopped it.

Maybe it hadn't been smart to break the thing. Maybe Bahader of Sana would be upset. Maybe Arabia would declare war on Cook County. A hell of a lot I cared.

I sniffed at the air. The smell was gone. I washed my hands and dried them on a dish towel and went back into the living room.

On the coffee table stood the Seventh Bottle.

"Nonsense," I said. From the radio a voice full of baritone charm said, "And now for a medley of hit tunes from—"

I reached down and shut the thing off. Hit tunes were fine, but not at the moment. Not for me. I turned around and went back into the kitchen and took the lid off the waste can.

It was empty.

"Well, well," I said, and laughed. It wasn't much of a laugh.

The doorbell rang.

I was across the living room and opening the door before I remembered to wonder who would be stopping by at this hour. By that time it was too late to ask questions. Bahader of Sana was standing in the hall, flanked by his two frozen-faced punks. My muscles tensed to slam the door in their faces, but a foreign-shod foot snaked out and jammed the opening.

"Good evening, Monsieur Kemp," Bahader said suavely. "We meet again. May we come in?"

"No."

One of the young men hit the door hard with his shoulder. I stepped back quickly to prevent the edge from catching me in the face. The three of them came in and the door was shut, with one of the hard boys leaning against it. The other took a gun casually out of his pocket and held it down along his leg.

Bahader looked from me to the coffee table and some of the age seemed to leave his face. "So the bottle has returned, monsieur."

"You knew it would?"

His shaggy brows lifted. "But of course. This is a very interesting bottle, Monsieur Kemp."

"Yeah."

"It remains away from its owner no more than twelve hours. No matter what he attempts to do with it, it will return. From the depths of the sea, from the highest

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mountain top, from the heart of a holocaust."

"From the Union Station checkroom," I said.

He almost smiled. "Exactly. Which is why I misled you by saying I would arrange to pick it up at your office tomorrow. You might have had the authorities there to meet us."

He stepped past me and picked up the bottle. His back seemed straighter and there were a few less wrinkles in his face. Even his graying goatee seemed to have filled out.

"That," I said, "will be twenty-five cents."

". . . I beg your pardon."

"Twenty-five cents," I repeated patiently. "One-fourth of a dollar, U. S. That's what it cost me and I don't know why I should hand you any gifts."

"Naturally," he said gravely. He put down the bottle, took an ostrich-skin billfold from an inner pocket, removed a banknote and tossed it on the table. One hundred dollars. "Will that do, Monsieur Kemp?"

I didn't say anything. He put away the billfold and took up the bottle again. He rubbed a palm lightly across the concave sides of the thing, like an old man stroking his young wife. "For thirty-two years I have searched for this. Ever since I learned of its existence from the pages of an ancient manuscript. Four days ago I learned that it had been purchased by two American tourists and brought to this country. I traced them, and this morning spoke with the owners. I was informed by one of them that the article had been sold to you no more than an hour before."

"Whereupon," I said, "you cut her throat."

His leathery skin darkened. "The lady appeared to resent my questions at first. One of my assistants forced her to answer. When he released her she struck him. Before I could prevent it, he had slit her neck."

I thought about Penelope Payne and her sister. They would have soon discovered the stink and the blood, and they would try to get rid of the bottle, but always it would come back. Because it returned to them instead of the shop in Damascus, they would correctly reason that the only way to dispose of the thing would be to sell it. You don't stick your friends with a hunk of horror, so the idea came to pay a stranger to buy it. A

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stranger like, say, a private detective. Preferably a crummy private detective dishonest enough to take a lot of money to do the job. Give him a phony name so he can't get back at you, and your problem is solved.

"About the bottle," I said through stiff lips. "Why can't it be destroyed? And why the blood?"

His wise, evil old eyes were unblinking. "The Western world is very young, monsieur; it does not believe, or understand, the ancient mysteries of the East. You have heard of the Genii?"

"Today," I said, "I believe anything. Make the most of it."

"In the days of the Genii," Bahader said, "it sometimes came to pass that one would be imprisoned in a bottle, held there by the Seal of Solomon carved in the stopper. Should such a Genie be set free, his first act is to shatter his former cell that never again may it hold him. This he must do, lest some mortal learn the incantation that will return him to his original bondage.

"However, it may happen that he is prevented from destroying his prison at the time he escapes. For that reason he places upon it a spell to keep the bottle whole until he may return and himself shatter it beyond recall. However he must prevent it from passing beyond the eyes and the knowledge of men that he may readily learn where it be kept. Thus the bottle can be passed from one to another only by purchase; nor can it be hidden, for the stench grows so strong that no human may ignore its presence."

He stopped there. I said, "There's no Seal of Solomon on the one you're holding."

"It is there," he said. "Under the opaque glaze. Please be seated, Monsieur Kemp. The couch, if you don't mind."

I sat down and put my bare feet on the edge of the coffee table. Bahader said something I didn't understand, and his two thugs began to clear a sizable space in the center of the living room carpeting. When the furniture was out of the way, the old Arab took a length of yellow chalk from one of his pockets and with the quick competent movements of an old hand at the game drew a precise pentagram on the material's hard pile. His two goons, fear flickering in their dark eyes, backed slowly away until their spines were flattened against the far wall.

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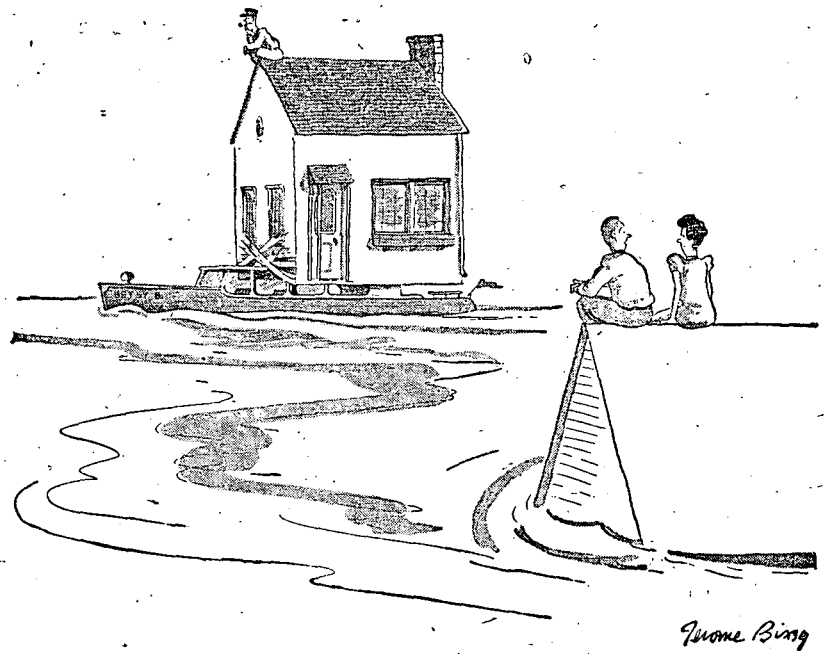
The pentagram finished, Bahader of Sana squatted down on his heels in its center, the bottle clasped between his age-blotched hands, and began a sing-song chant that sounded older than the first Pharaoh.

It went on and on, something that would have been fine if you were in bed with Scheherazade, but in the middle of the Twentieth Century Chicago it was as out of place as spats at a tiger hunt. I put out a hand to pick up my unfinished highball . . . and froze there, my scalp lifting.

A thin coil of smoke had begun to rise in one corner



"Remember when we kidded him about building a boat in his basement?"

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of the quiet, stifling room.

One of the young Arabs moaned and both of them tried to shrink into the woodwork. The smoke grew heavier and thicker, more and more of it, rising like a swirling column to the ceiling. It stopped increasing finally, then came slowly across the floor like the funnel of a cyclone until it reached the nearest chalk mark. That stopped it cold.

The column hung there, boiling angrily, radiating a power beyong belief. Slowly and carefully it moved around the perimeter of the seven-sided design, as though hoping to find some break, however small in the thin yellow lines. I understood, then, that if such a opening existed, Bahader of Sana would have the thing in his lap.

Bahader's chant ceased. Silence filled the room. No one appeared to be breathing. And out of the column of smoke came a voice like something out of Revelations.

"I am thy slave, O Master. Command me and I shall obey."

Bahader opened his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it. I said, "There is no god but Allah," and hammered my heels with all my strength against the edge of the coffee table. It skidded across the rug and halfway into the center of the yellow pentagram.

The old Arab screamed once; then the pillar of smoke enveloped him, rotated so fast it blurred, lifted and disappeared. Bahader was gone, the bottle was gone, and the air in the room cracked like a high-voltage wire in a sleet storm.

The two hoodlums reached the door at the same time. There wasn't room enough for both of them to get through simultaneously, but that was how they left. I listened to their feet thud into silence, then I walked shakily over and closed the door.

I put the coffee table back where it belonged. It seemed heavier than usual, but that was only because I had aged considerably during the past few minutes.

The hundred-dollar bill was still where Bahader had dropped it. I picked it up and snapped it a time or two. It was crisp and new and was more than enough to pay next month's rent.

Penelope Payne would have flowers at her funeral. At least one hundred dollars' worth.

THE END

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Dr. Schpritzer's Island

BY VERN FEARING

They accused Conoway of trying to cheat the government. It seemed there was a good reason for the charge; otherwise why would he send tons of mosquito netting to the North Pole?

EVERYONE likes to predict things, especially rare and surprising things, affairs of magnitude; and secretly everyone feels he can. The more confounding it is when it happens, the more one hears, afterward, "I saw the whole thing coming."

Well, here's something I see coming, and I'm not waiting. Today, November 2, 1953, I say for the record that any day now I expect the emergence of Dr. Theo. Schpritzer and Daniel Conoway as world figures. I believe entirely Conoway's stories of a lush tropical island in the frozen arctic, where polar bears climb palm trees and crack coconuts. I foresee the news that Conoway successfully duplicated Dr. Schpritzer's weather machine, and for the second time located the lost Schpritzer Expedition. I say all this aware that what is involved here will likely alter not only the course of human destiny, but the destiny of the planet we inhabit.

There's just one thing, though, that might go wrong, and I think it would be better if I explained it in advance.

Conoway's story begins the day he was sent for by his superior and put on the carpet. Conoway was then employed by the Department of Agriculture, in the Agricultural Research Administration, where he had specialized for a decade in insect control. It was the first time in a tranquil and dedicated career that he had ever been in official trouble.

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"Mr. Conoway, to what extent did you commit the A.R.A. in supporting the Schpritzer Expedition?"

"The Schpritzer Expedition? What is it?"

"It's a mess, Mr. Conoway."

". . . Yes? Well, I never committed the A.R.A. to support it."

"Mr. Conoway, the few months that I have lived in Washington have been sufficient to give me a deep understanding of the pressures of government life, social, economic, political. We are every one of us subject to great pressures, Mr. Conoway, and we all make mistakes."

"I never heard of the Schpritzer Expedition."

"Perhaps this will refresh your memory . . ."

Conoway took the proffered folder. What he found inside did somewhat refresh his memory, but it made the rest of him feel very tired. "If I may," he said, "I'd like to study these before I say anything else."

Later in the day he received photostats. He went through the stuff carefully, unable to shake off the growing conviction that he was wasting his time on nonsense.

The Schpritzer Expedition, it turned out, was a private scientific venture, for the purpose of polar weather observation, which had been granted a sizable Federal loan. The last funds of this loan had been spent in March, 1952, on an order for several bales—or was it tons?—of mosquito netting. The netting was shipped to Point Barrow, Alaska, to await further instructions. More than a year had passed but it was still unclaimed, mouldering in a warehouse.

Now, apparently, someone was trying to figure out this strange circumstance, with a view toward fixing responsibility for the loan, but half a dozen Federal agencies were tangled in the netting, and all were thrashing about, denying it. Conoway found voluminous correspondence from the National Security Resources Board, the Commodity Credit Corporation, the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the Joint Meteorological Board and the Fruit-Frost Service of the Weather Bureau, and the Defense Fisheries Administration. The last one had written the Weather Bureau asking what they knew about Dr. Schpritzer; the Bureau had referred this to its J.M.B. and F.F.S., and the

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F.F.S. had passed the request on to the A.R.A.

There it had come to Conoway's desk, and though he did not remember the incident, he found a photostat of his answer: *"Dr. Schpritzer is mentioned in our files as a 'rainmaker' who practices largely on the west coast. In Washington State he is known as 'The Wizard of Wynooche'."* The Weather Bureau had forwarded this to the D.F.A., which sent copies to the other agencies, after which one of them had done business with Dr. Schpritzer.

Conoway's trouble was that this brief statement, copied verbatim from the A.R.A. files, had been used as the basis for an endorsement of the doctor and his expedition. When he discovered how this had come about, Conoway went back to his superior.

"It's quite clear now," he said. "Somebody in the C.C.C. took my note, looked up Wynooche's rainfall — 141 inches that year — and concluded that Dr. Schpritzer was really a wizard as a rainmaker. I consider it a ridiculous mistake."

"Mr. Conoway, there's more to this than you think."

"You see, Wynooche is in the Olympic Mountains in Washington, and its annual precipitation is normally the highest in the country."

"The Department of Justice may be called in."

"Under the circumstances, I suppose that being called 'The Wizard of Wynooche' is actually a form of derision."

"The new administration is determined to ferret out and prosecute every instance of corruption."

"It may well be that this Schpritzer is a humbug."

"Mr. Conoway, there is a feeling among some members of a certain Congressional committee that the Schpritzer Expedition was basically a paper organization, I mean a swindle."

"Some rain-makers, of course, do seem to get results."

"In fact, Mr. Conoway, there seems to be a conspiracy here to mulct the Federal treasury—and at this point, you are considered to have had a part in it."

At this point, violently enough, Dan Conoway woke up.

Conoway's solution was as novel as it was desperate. He went to Alaska to prove that the Schpritzer Expedition was a fraud.

What he really wanted to do, of course, was to find

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Schpritzer and get, say, an affidavit, or something, to show that he had had nothing whatever to do with the expedition or its leader. But for Conoway to get anyone to underwrite such an effort to clear himself was a far more difficult affair than getting himself assigned to—as his superior termed it—an undercover pre-investigative investigation. The assumption was that he had decided to cooperate, and was anxious that the record early demonstrate his concrete help. He let them think what they liked, and looked remorseful . . .

In retrospect, Conoway's plan seems to have little to commend it. What made him think he could or would find Dr. Schpritzer in Alaska?—or that, finding the redoubtable doctor, he could wring an affidavit out of him, or even a comforting word?—or that such a document, if he got it, would mean anything to anyone?

But he had no real alternative. He had talked his head off for a few days, seeking out people he knew, for advice or some exercise of influence, and had soon learned that mere announcment of his trouble made him an untouchable. Waiting, doing nothing, he faced impending suspension . . . for how long? After that he would have to get along somehow, living under a cloud, hoping for ultimate exoneration. There was no doubt that it was better to try not to be accused, than to be proved innocent . . .

And there was something else. Conoway did have a little to go on. His digging had produced two nubbins of information. First the Schpritzer Expedition had been scheduled to start north, from San Diego, in May, 1951. Second, the order for the mosquito netting had been signed by Dr. Schpritzer, in Point Barrow, on March 12, 1952. So that if the doctor had indeed left on schedule, and had spent the next nine or ten months in Alaska, or thereabouts, it was not impossible to hope he had stayed even longer.

It wasn't much of a chance, but it was something.

On May 6, 1953, Conoway took off for Alaska.

An Air Force plane got him to Anchorage, another flew him to Fairbanks. There his credentials were honored with a secret briefing that—while it raised questions almost as important as those it answered—apparently ended Conoway's investigation.

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The big question it settled was: was there currently a Schpritzer Expedition? The Air Force said no.

They knew because on March 19, 1952, the A.F. had landed a C-47 on an ice island —named "T-3" but known also as Fletcher Island—one hundred miles from the North Pole. They had established a permanent weather station which communicated by radio, and was staffed and supplied by air.

"Our reports show that 'T-3' hasn't heard a peep from the Expedition since December 25, 1952. Christmas Day. What possible significance that has, I don't know."

"Does that mean," asked Conoway, "that 'T-3' did hear from the Expedition before last Christmas Day?"

"Yes, often. Almost every day during last April and May, then less frequently. By December, the average was down to once a week, and Christmas Day was the last time."

"What was it you'd hear from them?"

"Nothing much, usually requests for weather information."

"Where was the Expedition located?"

"We're not sure. 'T-3' reported radio fixes several times, but always different ones. A bad signal, possibly, or interference, magnetic influences, who knows? Things happen up here."

"But wasn't the Expedition ever seen?"

"We're not satisfied that it was. There were reports that it had been sighted on a peninsula on Parry Island, at Ballantyne Straits . . . latitude 77.58, longitude 118.11 . . . but only from June through October, 1951. If it was the Schpritzer Expedition, it never responded to signals and never identified itself, so we really don't know. But if it was there, it isn't there now, and it hasn't been sighted since October, 1951."

"Have you been searching for it?"

"No, not particularly."

"But why not?"

"Why yes, Mr. Conoway? First, Parry Island is deep in Canadian territory; we cooperate but we try not to infringe. Second, keep in mind the sequence. Even if we had wanted to search for the Expedition—assuming its identity—winter in the arctic is a pretty hopeless season for searching. Then, by spring of '52, after we established our 'T-3' station, searching seemed unnecessary because 'T-3' was hearing from the Expe-

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dition. When that stopped on Christmas Day, we were up against winter again. Well, this is May, and I suppose we could institute a search, if we knew what we were looking for and where to begin—and if we were interested. But frankly, Mr. Conoway, we've plenty of other things to do, and we don't give a damn."

Nevertheless, Conoway left there for Point Barrow with a sense of elation. Mysterious though the evidence was, he could see a possible case building at least for the past existence of a Schpritzer Expedition, and there was a great difference between a mysterious, or lost, or doomed expedition, and a swindle.

The Air Force's "T-3" had assumed the Expedition's existence until five months ago. The next step was to verify Dr. Schpritzer's presence in Point Barrow, nine months before that, when he had ordered the mosquito netting. Then back to the States, to San Diego, to see if he could establish a departure date for the Expedition.

He had stopped thinking in terms of finding the doctor.

But in Point Barrow a very strange thing happened, and basically it had to do with crickets.

Conoway had gone to the warehouse to see the mosquito netting, enormous bales of it; it was depressing. Then he had gone to the telegraph office where Dr. Schpritzer's order had been placed. The manager remembered the doctor very well, for many reasons, among them the doctor's great girth, his black spade beard, and his booming laugh. Surely a memorable individual, but there was more. The manager had had occasion to recall Dr. Schpritzer because a neighbor had a tape recording with the doctor's unmistakable, wild laughter on it, and they had quarreled about it.

How had this come about? The manager's neighbor was a short wave enthusiast, whose joy in life it was to contact distant regions; the more distant, the better; except that people he knew were skeptical when he boasted. He had therefore bought a tape recorder and improved his reputation. But one morning he picked up Hawaiian music and recorded five minutes of it before it ended abruptly, without anyone speaking or otherwise identifying the source of the music. Not that there weren't voices; they were numerous, in the background, singing

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and laughing, and among them, loudest of all (said the manager), were the happy stentorian tones of Dr. Schpritzer.

"For all I know," said the manager, "it was Hawaii, and the doctor was there. After all, the one time I saw him was in March, and this was November, so it was possible, even though I've been cramming ever since that it wasn't. The thing I do know, and I'd bet on it, is that it positively is Dr. Schpritzer laughing."

Understandably, this did sound odd to Conoway, because "T-3" had still been hearing from Schpritzer in November, and not from Hawaii.

So Conoway went to the manager's neighbor, the short wave bug, and said enough to get the tape played. He listened carefully to the music (it was beautiful); the voices, the laughter, and had no trouble deciding which laugh was supposed to be Schpritzer's. When it was over, he shrugged. He had heard the crickets in the background, too, but that didn't mean anything to him yet.

"Now that you've heard it," said the man, "wouldn't you swear I had Hawaii? Wasn't that Hawaiian music?"

"I'd say so, yes."

"Well, seeing you've got a legitimate interest in this, I'll tell you something, if you'll promise to keep it to yourself. You see, I can't back down from saying it's Hawaii, and nobody can prove it ain't—but I know it ain't."

"How do you know?"

"Listen to this."

He played another tape. On it, Conoway heard two men conversing briefly about technical weather details. At one point there was a pause, a muffled aside, and an explosive burst of laughter before the conversation resumed. Unquestionably, this was the same voice on both tapes. The second tape had no music, and no crickets, but when the talking ended, the voice that had laughed merely said, "Thank you very much. Good morning,"—while the other identified himself as Air Force Weather Observation Station "T-3" and concluded, "Good morning, Dr. Schpritzer."

"You see?" said the man. "It was somebody right around here, on both tapes. I made them one day apart, at the same hour, on the same wavelength. The only way I explain it—why, I ain't in a position to say—is that the first time they must've been

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playing some sort of recording with Hawaiian music on it."

But now Conoway was stirring; indeed, like the crickets he had heard on the first tape, he was vibrating at a very high rate. He listened to the tape again, unconcerned with whether the music was a recording—though he thought not—but to hear the crickets. Certainly the crickets were not on a recording (who beside Conoway had ever recorded crickets anyway?).

He listened to the tape a third time, slowing it sufficiently to count the chirping against the second-hand on his watch. He did this several times during the playing, and by the time the tape ended, Conoway knew that somehow, somewhere, he had to find Dr. Schpritzer or his Expedition.

Why? Because now Conoway knew that last November, with winter well on the way, Dr. Schpritzer—assuredly somewhere in the Arctic Zone—had been not only where there were crickets, but where the crickets told him the local temperature there was about ninety degrees, Fahrenheit.

You see, Conoway knew there is a relationship between air temperature and the tempo of a cricket's chirp. This is true; every insect man knows it; count the number of chirps in 14 seconds, add 40, and you have the temperature within a few degrees. Conoway had counted 50 or more chirps in each interval.

That did it. The whole weird affair had him going now. His bad situation back home had become quite secondary. Now he was determined to find out whether those crickets had been telling the truth about a temperature that seemed well suited to Hawaiian music—or else he was going to come back with a new species of polar cricket, and make insect history.

It took a few days to complete arrangements for the next leg of Conoway's investigation. It took, also, a series of urgent phone calls to Washington, D.C., to authorize it, but Conoway was a man with a mission, capable of anything. He lied openhandedly, letting out hints of a vast, looming scandal, and everything went smoothly.

On May 12, 1953, an Air Force plane flew him from Point Barrow to Aklavik, in the Canadian Yukon Territory. There he was turned over to a private flier, a bush

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pilot, who had come on from Coppermine to meet him, and they were granted further authority for reconnaissance flying. He then proceeded to Mackenzie Bay, then due east along the coast to Amundsen Gulf, then north across Banks Island to Cape Prince Alfred, where the plane could be serviced and sheltered.

The morning of May 15, Conoway's pilot took him up to begin the reconnaissance. They crossed the McClure Straits and flew over Parry Island, toward a point marked on their charts as latitude 77.58, longitude 118.11. This was where the Schpritzer Expedition had presumably been sighted, for the last time, in October, 1951.

It was a lovely day. The deep intense blue of the sun-lit sky showed scarcely a cloud. Below them the ice-bound sea stretched white and endless, and land was discernible only where winds had torn away the snow from barren crags, or where shadows marked elevations.

When they reached the point on their charts, there was nothing to see. The plane flew within fifty feet of the surface, throttle way down, criss-crossing the immediate area, then slowly enclosing a larger area as it began to gain altitude. There was not a trace, not a sign that anything alive had ever preceded them here. The one noteworthy feature of the landscape was that the northeast peninsula of Parry Island—supposedly the Expedition's site—was considerably smaller than represented on the charts. The pilot remarked on it, and Conoway sighed, deep in gloom and disappointment, reflecting on how such an inconsequential error might one day, if it became known, ruin the life of some cartographer in Montreal . . .

They rose higher, crossing the Ballantyne Straits to Brock Island. Beyond it they saw Borden Island, and beyond that—where, in the direction they faced, there should have been only the bright waste of ice fields, they saw a long, slender black line.

A moment later it had vanished. Individually, each doubted his vision, but not when they agreed. Neither had any idea of the true dimensions of the black line, or its distance from Borden Island, but they decided to head toward where they had seen it.

Ten minutes went by without sighting anything, then suddenly a mist seemed to be

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hanging in the sky. Seconds later, they were in it, flying in a heavy vapor that veiled the sun and swiftly cut down visibility. But at the last moment before they were flying blind, they not only saw the black line again, but realized with astonishment that it was actually a sizable, irregular oval of unfrozen open sea. They flew on for perhaps another minute or so, and then it began to rain. All at once the rain ended. The plane dipped sharply earthward, recovered, ascended, and started to circle back. The rain and the mist were gone. The ice fields reached unbroken to the horizon.

Then the plane started losing altitude swiftly and dangerously. The rain had frozen into a sheath of ice around it, and only excellent flying brought it down safely to a short, bumpy landing on its skis.

Conoway and his pilot talked a little then, when they had found breath, and concluded there was nothing to discuss, that of course they had to find that open water again. The immediate prospect, however, involved getting the plane to fly again.

"How long should that take?" Conoway asked.

"Until we get the ice off," said the pilot.

They never did get the ice off. An hour later, still chipping away laboriously at the tail surfaces, numb with cold, they looked up and found themselves facing six fur-clad men armed with rifles.

The long arctic day was ending when they reached their destination. Conoway could not estimate how far they had come, or in what direction. The going, on foot and by dog-sled, had been uneven; moreover, in the dog-sled he had slept for an indeterminate period, overwhelmed by fatigue.

In all the time they traveled, no one said a word to Conoway. His pilot was in another sled, and the four men (two had stayed behind with the plane) who conducted the dog teams were a silent group. They did not identify themselves, they gave no explanations, they answered no questions, but they managed to be thoroughly understood merely by pointing their rifles.

By sundown they were in a strange area of fantastic icy gorges, of cliffs and pinnacles, twisted and deformed by monstrous polar winds. Here the party halted. Two of the armed men took the dog-sleds, the

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other two led Conoway and the pilot farther on. Not long afterward, they entered a cave hewn in the base of a huge cone of ice. Inside, the cave expanded sufficiently to house three large tents made of hide, and two smaller ones of canvas.

From one of the canvas tents came the sound of wood being sawed; a shouted call from the armed men brought it to an end. The tent flap parted and out came a bare-headed, flaxen-haired young woman, dressed like an Eskimo. She came closer and Conoway saw that she was quite beautiful, with eyes that were as cold and unfathomable and blue as the Northern sky.

She said to Conoway and the pilot, "Dawbraw pawzhalawvaht."

Conoway said. "I don't speak Russian."

"No matter," said the girl. "All I said was 'welcome'."

They were Russians, all of them, eight men and a girl. Conoway was with them five days, and from what he saw, and what they told him (several spoke English), he learned a lot about them; certainly he discovered what was important about them.

Probably the best way to describe them was to say they were spies, but they were both more and less than spies. They were a versatile group of arctic specialists; explorers, weather observers, a mining engineer (the girl), a botanist, a physicist, and more; in a sense, they were merely scientists at work in a zone considered to be international. On the other hand, scientists did not take prisoners by force of arms, and did not confine their activity to spying on another scientist.

Needless to say, they were spying on Dr. Theo. Schpritzer, who was apparently somewhere in the vicinity. . . .

Conoway found this out on his second day in captivity. He was in one of the canvas tents, working on a boat. Earlier, there had been four of them working, but now only he and the girl were there, he hammering and she sawing. When the girl stopped for one of her infrequent rest periods, he stopped with her. In the adjoining canvas tent, where a second boat was also nearing completion, drills and hammers could be heard. Conoway wondered how the pilot was doing there; they had been kept separated after their arrival.

"Weather belongs to the people!" the girl announced.

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(Her name was Natasha; she had announced that the day before; indeed, most of her meager conversations with him consisted of announcements, often with an accusatory inflection.)

Conoway nodded. "Yes," he said, "I think it's safe to say that it does."

Natasha looked doubtful. "Not in your country," she said.

"Which — the weather, or the saying so?"

"Both. In America it is dangerous to tell the truth, and what is the truth? — the weather is being kept from them. Pardon, I mean the *good* weather. But, no matter, this is wrong."

"Yes, it is."

"Don't say it just to please me."

"I'm not. I honestly mean it."

"Then why do you take part in it?" She shook her head at him. "Be ashamed, but do not deny it. We know from your papers that you represent your government. We know your mission is so secret it has been necessary to fool even the Canadian government. But we are not fooled. We know as well as you the present location of Dr. Schpritzer's island, and what he is doing there. Are you surprised?"

"Yes," said Conoway, "I think it's safe to say that I am."

She smiled, picked up her saw, and went back to work on the boat. Conoway took his hammer, resisted the impulse to pound himself on the head a little, and joined her.

The next day, Natasha was more friendly. "Everyone is capable of reforming," she declared.

"I believe in that," said Conoway.

"Everyone can be educated to think as we do."

"I sometimes wonder."

"You must be more hopeful. It depends on your willingness to study. We will see after we capture the island."

"Good. . . . How soon will that be?"

"When the boats are finished. We need them for the invasion."

"Yes, I realize that."

"Tomorrow the other one will be ready for testing."

Conoway could hardly wait. . . .

On the fourth day, Conoway saw open water again. The shore, a ledge of ice, stretched for some distance before it curved out of sight, but the water was visible for only

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some fifty or sixty feet out. The rest of it faded way in a thick mist that rose from the surface.

Conoway was amazed to find that the Russian camp was not far from the water. It had taken a full day overland to reach the camp from where the plane had landed; flying, the water and their landing place had been minutes apart.

The Russians had loaded a boat on runners, and a party that included Conoway and Natasha had shoved and hauled it to the water in a quarter of an hour. They launched the boat, attached an outboard motor of odd design, and two men jumped in. Soon they were sailing back and forth along the shore.

In the stillness, the motor made a tremendous sound; even the water washing back from the bow seemed unnaturally loud.

Conoway asked Natasha, "How far away is the island?"

"It varies. A half mile, a mile, a mile and a half. . . . Why?"

"Can't the motor be heard there?"

"Very likely. But what can they do? This is the first time it has happened. They know nothing about us, they are unprepared for us, and even if they communicate with Station 'T-3' for help (you see, we know everything), it will come too late."

"I see," said Conoway.

When they were through testing the boat, a roaring success, it was beached and covered with tarpaulin. The party was about to head for camp when they stopped and stared up into the sky.

A rainbow was forming, a magnificent arch, with delicate bands of spectral color as pure as though refracted through a prism. It hung over the mist in a breathtaking spectacle, holding them in silence for the five minutes or so it lasted. At the end, Natasha was pressing Conoway's heavily mittened hand in her own. "Is it right," she whispered, "to keep such things for a chosen few?"

"No," said Conoway sincerely. He let go of her hand. The others were waiting for them, watching.

Now the party started moving. Conoway and the girl brought up the rear, walking slowly, letting the others pull away. By the time the others had reached outlying formations of the grotesque blocks and boulders that hid their camp, these two were only a third of the way there. They began to walk faster, when a

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flurry of snow blew by them. Conoway turned and looked back. The air over the water was filled with falling snow.

"Hurry," said Natasha in alarm. "There may be a storm."

But in a moment the storm was upon them. A great wind sprang up suddenly, racing across the ice fields toward the water, pushing them back. Briefly, Conoway glimpsed the others waving them on, then they had disappeared among the boulders. The wind was screaming now, powerful enough to send large jagged fragments of ice scudding, raising huge masses of loose, swirling crystals. It was impossible to fight it, to attempt reaching camp, or to remain there. Conoway took firm hold of Natasha and led her, stumbling and staggering, back toward the water, looking for the boat.

When they found it, the tarpaulin had almost torn loose; they pulled it in under the boat with them, wrapped themselves in it, and prepared to wait out the storm.

The wind howled, the water foamed; inside, all was snug. . . .

An hour later, when the storm had abated, a rescue party arrived to dig them out. Reassured by the condition of the refugees and the boat, they went on quickly to another task awaiting them at the water's edge. Natasha joined them and Conoway sat alone on the boat, in a daze. Not far away, the Russians were shouting happily, and he turned to watch with only small interest as they hauled up lobsters and clams from a shoal. Nor did he react when they returned, and he observed that the lobsters were already boiled, and the clams nicely steamed. He had experienced too many of nature's capricious wonders in too brief a time. . . .

When night came, he lay awake through the few hours of darkness. He thought about the men who shared his tent, snoring in a foreign language; about Natasha, sleeping with the pack dogs in the tent next to his; about the pilot, with the group in the tent beyond. He thought about the storm, and winds that could distort and destroy ice mountains. When his watch told him it was time, he crawled silently out of the tent and through the cave.

The inky sky was becoming luminous. He ran in the direction of the water. By the time he reached the boat, the horizon was flaming. He got

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the boat into the sea, started the motor, and headed into the mist.

They welcomed Conoway to Dr. Schpritzer's island in a variety of languages, with songs and flowers. A fleet of outriggers escorted his boat as soon as it penetrated the vapor and nuzzled into tropical sunlight; people waved from canoes and rafts; finally, coming in on a long comber to the palm-fringed shore, he had to be careful about swimmers. They met him on the beach and hung him with vivid blossoms. A mixed chorus sang *Chloe,* jugglers performed, then dancers, then groups of instrumentalists. Others emerged from the verdant depths of the island to spread a lavish feast in an orange grove, and scores of men and women of every description sat down to break breadfruit with Conoway. Birds with incredible plumage called in the trees, the air was fragrant, the gentlest of breezes came from the sea. Conoway passed out, but a nimble-witted diner thought to remove his hooded parka and fur boots. They revived him, gave him more suitable clothes and a cigar, and the feast continued.

Twice Conoway slept. He awoke the first time refreshed, and judged he had slept a good while. But the position of the sun had scarcely altered, and enthusiasm at the feast seemed undiminished, so he decided he was wrong. The second time he came to with a start, the din of crickets loud in his ears, thinking he had had a mere snooze, but it was night; stars were shining; the grove was softly lit with Japanese lanterns, and a five-piece band was playing *Begin The Beguine* for dancers in a pavilion.

Close by, engaged in conversation, stood a huge, round man with a black spade beard. Befuddled as he was, Conoway knew he was at last in the presence of Dr. Schpritzer, and called him by name.

The doctor turned and smiled. "Hello. How are you?"

"I must talk to you," said Conoway.

"Not now. Why don't you join the dance?"

"I have something to tell you, something very urgent."

"Let it wait. Tomorrow, maybe . . ."

"But it can't wait."

"Just wait and see," said the doctor reassuringly. "I'm sorry you don't dance. This nocturnal interlude was in

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your honor, a romantic notion, but it seems to have confused you. Well," he smiled, "we'll throw some light on the subject." With this, he chose a turkey leg and departed.

Minutes later the darkness lifted with frightening abruptness. The night sky was gone. A dazzling sun was back in place, high in the heavens, and Conoway's first day on the island was over and done with.

The next time they met was probably three or four days later—according to extra-island calculation—but Conoway was not sure. The hours there had a way of slipping by with great speed, but in retrospect each day seemed to have been several days long; moreover, this was sometimes literally true; the hours of day and night were subject to change, depending on who got to the doctor with what reason, and he was reputed to be a most amenable man. But he was not easy to find. Some said he had gone fishing, others thought not, and Conoway, roaming the length and breadth of the island in pursuit of Schpritzer, had met increasing evasiveness from the islanders. By the time he found the doctor, Conoway was in a terrible state.

It came about when he heard Schriptzer laughing, and traced the sound to the yard behind the island barber shop. The doctor was engaged in shearing a large, docile polar bear. "You look agitated," he remarked to Conoway.

"Dr. Schpritzer, you must talk to me . . ."

"I'll be very pleased to. What about?"

"You must tell me what's going on here."

"Indeed. I thought you wanted to tell *me* something?"

"I do . . . it's very important . . . but that was days ago, and since then . . ." He gestured futilely. "No one here will explain anything to me. I ask them who they are, or how they got here, or why they're here, and they look at me and go away . . ."

"Yes, I've heard," said the doctor, snipping away at the bear's foreleg. "People think it odd you've come all the way here, just to ask where you are. The only ones who've stumbled on the place are the Eskimos, and a fellow I believe was hunting pitchblende. Not that you have to tell me, but what did make you come?"

Conoway sat down. "My

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name," he began, "is Daniel Conoway. I work for the Agricultural Research Administration . . ."

The doctor listened and worked without interruption, and when Conoway's recital ended, it was clear that the bear was getting a poodle trim. "What an adventure," Schpritzer sighed. "And just think, it all started with mosquito netting, and crickets. . . . Did you check up on the crickets?"

". . . No . . ."

"Good. You'll be all right. One of these days you'll get the idea of the island, and everything will be fine."

". . . Doctor, I'm trying to tell you that one of these days there may not *be* an island."

"Come, don't be depressed. There'll always be an island. We've a song that goes like that."

"But what about the Russians?"

"I'm sure we have a few," said Schpritzer reflectively. "We have all sorts here. Of course, eight men and a girl, and the pilot is nine—if he's still alive, and they bring him—not a very balanced group, but we leave those things to the law of averages. I suppose we should shortly get a run of females. . . . How soon did you say we can expect them?"

"When they make another boat. They've got spare motors."

"Bless their hearts, we can use a few motors."

". . . You're not afraid of what they might do to the island?"

"No. The shoe is on the other foot. Let them come, you'll see what I mean." He put down his shears and kicked the polar bear's rump. The depilated beast waddled off to a nearby palm, shimmied his way up, and sat among the leaves cracking coconuts. "Come, take a walk with me to the weather shack, and I'll do my best to answer your questions . . . as long as they still seem important to you . . ."

They walked, and Conoway asked, "Who are the people here?"

"Just people. Who is anyone? Who are you?"

"What are they doing here?"

"Whatever you see. Some read, some garden, some sleep, some make love, some go sailing . . . whatever you see, or care to infer . . ."

"How did they get there?"

"One way or another. People manage. You did."

"But I had a reason."

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"So did they, I imagine."

"What are their reasons?"

"I can't say. You're one of the very few I've ever asked. Ordinarily I wouldn't think of prying."

"But this isn't just a matter of politeness . . ."

"No, it isn't. I just don't care. Neither does anyone else."

"But it's your island."

"Exactly, and everyone here, though uninvited, is perfectly welcome to be my guest."

"For how long?"

"It would be inhospitable to ask."

". . . But how did they find out about the place?"

"Oh, word gets around . . . You'd be surprised."

"What's going to happen when everyone knows about it?"

"Who can say? So far we're not the least bit crowded. The island is fruitful, and somehow, whatever needs doing gets done. True, I am not precisely advertising for people, but if they keep coming, I may decide to expand . . . You mustn't think I'm not proud of what I've done."

". . . Then this island is not a phenomenon of nature?"

"What a question. Have you ever seen nature more phenomenal?"

"I meant an accidental phenomenon."

"Certainly not. I created it with my weather machine . . ." Two ladies rode by on bicycles. ". . . Good morning, ladies."

"Lovely day, doctor."

"Thank you," said Schpritzer, and to Conoway, "In a story by O. Henry—I believe it was called *A Fog In Santone*—I once read, *'We may achieve climate, but weather is thrust upon us.'* Here I have achieved weather."

"But, Dr. Schpritzer, this is of inestimable value to the world. You owe it to humanity to protect and communicate this achievement."

"I daresay you're right . . . I've been thinking. Ah, here we are at the weather shack. I shall go in now and perform my magic."

"Please, let me go in with you . . . It's not secret, is it?"

The doctor laughed. "An unguarded, unlocked shack a secret? No, it's just a tedium explaining, and always unnecessary, if I can postpone it a little. Another day, perhaps. Meanwhile, you might go over to the fig plantation. I'm going to settle a very small cloud blanket on the crop to cool it off . . ."

Conoway went, and saw the doctor keep his promise. But, considering that on the way

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he had seen people in adjacent fields digging up baked yams, and taking ice-cold watermelon right off the vine, it was a minor marvel.

In succeeding days, the more incomprehensible things were, the less extraordinary they seemed. A change came over Conoway, too profound, too subtle for his own perception . . .

"Hello, Conoway, what brings you here?" It was Dr. Schpritzer, seated in a camp chair on a grassy knoll overlooking the sea, fussing with a small round box.

"Walking by," said Conoway. "That's not a concertina, is it?"

"No, it's a portable element from my machine. I'm going to make a rainbow."

". . . That's nice."

"Do you play a musical instrument?"

"Yes, the piano."

"Well, we don't have a piano. But I've thought of importing a few things, as soon as I see to the financing . . . a helicopter, for one. And I find it's no good relying on people to bring current books. What I need is an outside purchasing agent. Would you care to be my agent?"

"Hardly."

"No volunteers, that's my story . . . How are things?"

"Fine . . ."

"I'm all set, I think. Shall I explain what I do?"

". . . I'm going to see it, aren't I?"

"Yes, but don't you want to hear how I make the weather?"

". . . Not just now . . . tomorrow perhaps . . ."

Later, Conoway recalled he had meant to talk to the doctor about the Russians, but when he thought it over, he realized he didn't really give a damn.

Well, the Russians came. The outriggers welcomed them too, but a few pistol shots soon restored order . . .

From a bamboo stockade (to enclose the weather shack) where they set established headquarters, the new regime congratulated the islanders for seizing power, after which indentity cards were issued. Mottos to celebrate the historic occasion, and edicts to consolidate it, flowed in pressured streams, and activity was everywhere. They took inventories of the island's resources. They hung up pictures of Lenin, Stalin, and Marx (the last was really an old engraving of Walt Whitman, but no one minded). They caught Conoway

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and sentenced him to jail; when it turned out there wasn't any, they ordered him to make one. To demonstrate fairness, Conoway's pilot, still their captive, was given amnesty (but this, as the pilot subsequently told Conoway, was because they had forced him to fly the plane closer to the island, presumably awaiting further use). And there was talk of the more splendid things to come, like moving the island to Siberia (they knew it could move)—as soon as they got the hang of Dr. Schpritzer's weather machine.

No one was alarmed, from the doctor, who had experienced island life longest, to Conoway, the last of the acclimatized immigrants.

Schpritzer's status improved as the Russians studied his machine. First he had been arrested and denounced. A peoples' trial was held, and the doctor cheerfully confessed, in an hour-long lecture, the details of his incomparable invention. It was attended only by some drowsy Russians and Conoway, who was a prisoner, and resulted in a decision to put off tampering with the machine. The doctor was then paroled, then pardoned, then consulted. Then, after a particularly long day of unusual heat, which kept everyone at the beach, negotiations began to drag. From day to day, as every islander could see, the Russians were slackening their pace. They began postponing nonsensical projects along with useful ones, and there was also — since Natasha was the only woman they had seen in a long while, and she had preferred to bed down with *Pravda*—a certain amount of fraternizing. From these signs and others, there was confidence that the invasion would turn into a friendly visit, and the visit into residence . . .

As for Conoway, he had long since accepted his sentence. He disappeared into the interior, accompanied by Natasha, who was, after all, a mining engineer, and who had gone along to supervise the erection of the jail.

Then came the big rain. Instead of the gentle showers that Dr. Schpritzer occasionally arranged, this was a torrent, and the result of meddling from Tibor.

Tibor was the Russians' political commissar. His behavior alone had given steady concern. From the outset, he refused to get sunburned; when he caught a compatriot

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making water skiis, he spit on him and called him a Californian; he complained bitterly when the five-day plan became a five-week plan. Furthermore, he had had plans for Natasha which were not materializing. When she did not return from her labor of love, and Conoway's whereabouts proved a mystery, Tibor determined to flood them out.

With one careless move on the complex, regulated machine, Tibor produced a vast cloud and ruptured it.

The island was drenched, and Dr. Schpritzer was hours drying it out. A wild scene followed. The doctor forbade Tibor ever to touch the machine, Tibor ordered the doctor arrested. But there was no one to enforce the order. Tibor went for a weapon and returned with a water-logged rifle; every firearm on the island had been rendered useless by the downpour, and Schpritzer rose to the occasion by smashing a mandolin on Tibor's head, and deposed him.

Life resumed its accustomed abnormal cycle, and the island was once again serene . . .

On July 24th—as Conoway later found out—when the idyll came to an end. The day before there had been an announcement of the wedding festival for Conoway and Natasha. It stirred Tibor from the lethargy that had replaced his ferociousness. There had been rumors before this that Tibor was fermenting fruit juices; now he staggered up and down the beach, well juiced, shouting, "Bourgeois rot!" until Conoway clubbed him with an oar.

The next morning, the 24th, Tibor was seen to get into a motorboat and vanish with it through the curtain of mist. No one thought what it could mean, and no one worried—until he returned, and by then it was too late.

Tibor came back with a tommy-gun. He cleared the beach with a few rounds, came ashore, and headed inland. He was next seen returning with two captives, Natasha and the pilot. He ordered them into the boat, bound them hand and foot, and went inland again.

Conoway heard about it in the barber shop, where he had fallen asleep under a hot towel. He immediately raced for the beach. When he reached it, the sound of gunfire came from the direction of the weather shack. Instantly a wind sprang up, warm and

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wet, but Conoway did not falter. Swiftly he untied Natasha. She ran for the woods. There was more gunfire, and the wind suddenly took on a whirling motion. Conoway kneeled to release the pilot. The wind knocked him down.

All at once, the sea heaved itself up. A gigantic wave, its top towering above the trees, raced from the shoreline straight for the spinning, swirling mist—and atop this wave rode the boat, with Conoway and the pilot in it.

In a twinkling, they were through the mist, rushing toward the icy ledge that bordered the open water—only that, even before they had reached the other side, there was no longer any open water. When they looked behind them, the mist too was gone, and in its place stood an immense dome of ice, enclosing the entire area of the surrounding sea and the island within.

Conoway did not get back to Washington, D. C. until two weeks later, and it was then I heard the story. He stayed with me during the time he remained in the city because he was afraid to be alone, afraid that a fit of despondency would overcome his resolve to be heard—to prove his story—and to return to the site of Dr. Schpritzer's island and rescue the people inside the dome of ice.

Because Conoway is certain that they survived. He and the pilot remained at the scene for two days. They found warm clothing in the Russians' camp, and the plane sheltered and with enough fuel to guarantee their escape. They hacked at the great convex wall of ice, and penetrated it several times, but it kept freezing almost as fast as they chopped and dug. On the second day they realized there were warm drafts inside that were responsible for the continued freezing over—and once aloft, they circled the dome and found that the top, 3000 feet up, was open. Conoway says that enough sunlight can reach the island to keep its inhabitants alive.

He does not know for how long. This depends on how badly Tibor wrecked the machine. I heard a lot about that machine—all that Conoway learned from Dr. Schpritzer's lecture on its principles—and I include it here.

One must remember (Conoway told me) that summer and winter are not caused by the distance of the sun from the earth, but rather—and it

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is surprising to be reminded of this elementary fact—*because of the angle at which the sun's rays strike the surface of the earth.* The reason for this angle is the tilt in the earth's axis—about 23.5 degrees—which causes the parallel rays of the sun to strike with varying degrees of obliqueness.

Now, as Schpritzer did, let us explain what is a mirage, and how it is made. A mirage is a thin layer of very hot air, usually on a surface like a road or a desert or water, with an air layer immediately above it that is much cooler. The difference in the density of the two layers is so great—often 40 degrees in a few feet—that it bends light rays upward, as if a mirror had been placed between the cool air and the ground. What you then see is not the road or desert or water, but the sky, reflected on the surface.

All right? Step three, then: Six or seven miles up, in the stratosphere, the air temperature ceases to fall off with height. It remains constant and cold—say, 120 degrees below zero. *What Schpritzer's machine does (or did) is to shoot up very short electromagnetic or radio waves to that constant cold layer, creating a hot layer right above it.* This "mirage" seven miles up is actually a mirror, and Dr. Schpritzer's machine turned this mirror to bend or deflect the rays of the sun . . . in other words, controlling the obliqueness of the angle at which the rays normally strike.

With the mirror turned completely away—night.

With the mirror turned back—day.

With the mirror constantly bombarding one area with direct, vertical rays, another factor entered—since temperature depends not only on the amount of heat received, but the amount of heat radiated away. This means that Schpritzer was able to heat up his island for long periods, controlling the radiation both ways. With practice, he learned to use the pristine cold, dry arctic air, to load it with vapor, to make insulating clouds, to make rain, to boil or freeze small or large areas of land or water . . .

One more thing; a word about the island moving. Conoway told me that Schpritzer had indeed first located his Expedition on the northeast peninsula of Parry Island—the missing peninsula which itself became an

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island, because downward diffusion of heat, so ineffective in the arctic, ordinarily, that large tracts never thaw out below a foot from the surface —*in this case, thawed out so much that it broke off from the main body of Parry Island.* All Schpritzer then had to do was keep melting ice wherever he wanted to go, and when the wind was right, the island moved. . . .

It is strange that this particular bit of information kept recurring to Conoway, but this is perhaps because it was tied up with the wedding that never was held. It was because of this controllable movement that Dr. Schpritzer felt his island could legally be regarded as a vessel, and he, as master, could perform marriages, which, all in all, the climate encouraged remarkably.

Unfortunately, no one listened to Conoway, except in Fairbanks, where physicians listened and put him on sick leave. When he got to Washington, it was almost August. Congress was adjourning, the city was hot and empty. In vain he gave responsible authorities the dozen and one details that so well support his story.

But why go on? Either you believe it or you don't. Conoway has been missing for weeks, and the last I heard from him, he had two crack scientists working on a duplicate of Dr. Schpritzer's machine with the highest hopes for success.

So if Conoway has gone back up there, to unfreeze that dome and free the island, I expect to hear from him—unless that one thing I mentioned right at the beginning goes wrong. And that explains, also, why Schpritzer stopped communicating with Weather Station "T-3" and why he never claimed the mosquito netting.

First, he solved the instantaneous making of weather to a point where he just killed off all the mosquitoes with a quick series of cold spells. Second, he no longer needed the sort of information that "T-3" furnished. And third, once he had everything working so well, he just—as Conoway learned for himself—didn't give a damn about the outer world.

The danger now, you see, is that Conoway will go up there and succeed in his mission . . . and if that happens, he just might not care whether he comes back or not. The way he described it, it's pretty easy to go native—tropical fashion —up there at the North Pole.

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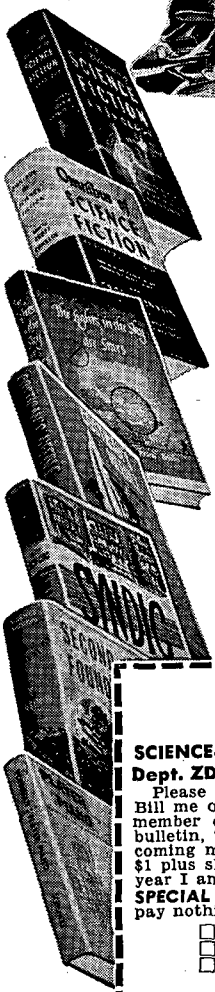

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